

The sparkling sea

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The sparkling sea

by [Evilkat23](#)

Summary

Matthew is a merman with a strange interest in a albino human, and a strict, but powerful father. When two of his brothers goes missing his father thinks the worst and sends Matthew to the surface in hopes of finding them. It's a shame he gets distracted by the wonders of the human world. Main Pairings Prucan, Ameripan, Sufin

Notes

Okay, let me start off with, yes, this obviously inspired by 'The little mermaid' but BUT! I want to make it my own. So this will have moments like 'The little mermaid' but will still differ from the movie in most ways! It's inspired but different! Please, stick with me on this, I promise it's not a cookie-cutter clone of the Disney movie! Now that being said, Feliciano and Ludwig will be children in this story.

Why?

Because I'm the author. Also, I feel I need to say this Australia doesn't seem to have a human name, that I know of, so I'm calling him Liam.

Marius is Romania

Petru is Moldova

Caught

The ocean. Many people in the small town just west of the coast know of it, after all, it was a nice place for them to take their children to relax and take a dip or whatever people do mostly during the hotter months. The water was a beautiful hue of blue that just *sparkled* right when the sun was just about to set. It looked absolutely magical.

That's what Gilbert always thought when he walked down from his house to the beach every night around 7 pm. Now, why would a person like Gilbert- a person with a ten-year-old little brother to look after- be coming to the beach every night at 7 pm when he should be at home. Well at first it was a habit of his seeing how he lived so close to the beach to just walk the sands and clear his head after all his awesome self had a lot on his shoulders. He was twenty and looking after his baby brother. Of course, he had a lot on his plate, but then it became different when his little Birdie or came into the picture.

Not his actual birdie, Gilbird, no, a person who he calls 'Birdie'. Gilbert calls Matthew his Birdie because well he didn't need a reason!

The two of them met on the beach, obviously!

Gilbert almost fell in love instantly.

This person had champagne-colored hair that just seemed to sparkle in the fading sunlight, pale pink skin, and violet eyes that would melt any man's soul. He couldn't be older than Gilbert. They didn't exactly have a good start. In fact the moment Gilbert, loudly, made himself known to the stranger asking for his name, the person fled behind a rock. This made Gilbert wonder if maybe he accidentally caught the guy skinning dipping.

Still, Gilbert just got some vibes from the guy that he couldn't quite place. First off: if the guy was skinny dipping; he didn't yell or scream at Gilbert to go away. There was also the fact that there weren't any clothes or towels on the beach. The second thing: He was peeking out at Gilbert from behind the rock, be it from the side or trying to look at him over the rock, he was looking at Gilbert with fascination like it was the first time seeing someone like him-

Then again. Gilbert was an albino...

It took a bit of coaxing, but in the end, Gilbert won and the stranger came out from behind the rock, but didn't get too close. Still, this person - his birdie- looked ready to bolt. The first day they talked Gilbert felt like he talking to a scared child. Still couldn't get his name though, but it worked. As the next night Birdie came back as did Gilbert.

Now here they were about four or five days into this routine and Gilbert still didn't know this guy's name... or why he seemed to keep his distance, but today was going to be different! With a couple of hibiscuses, that he stole from his neighbors lawn, he hoped to maybe learn this guy's godforsaken name!

Gilbert's shoes crunched the sand under them as he walked up to the shore where his Birdie was already waiting in the water as expected. "The awesome me is here!" Gilbert announced quite loudly.

Birdie looked at Gilbert with a small smile on his face. Slowly Birdie swam just a smidge closer, but not too close. "It's always nice to see you again, Gilbert." Birdie's voice was soft like cotton, honestly, Gilbert could hardly hear him over the crashing waves, but he was *just* loud enough.

"Of course! Because I am just that awesome!" Gilbert couldn't help but gloat as he walked up closer to the water. So close that the waves were starting to hit his shoes, getting his socks wet. "And because I am so awesome, I got you something!"

"Oh?" Birdie squinted his eyes suddenly like he was trying to see what was in Gilbert's hands. Gilbert cleared his throat.

"Yes! F-Flowers!" Gilbert almost stumbled over his words, which would have been unawesome. Gilbert then waited for Birdie to swim up and grab them, but he didn't.

"F-Flowers?" Birdie questioned.

"Yes!... Here..." Gilbert placed the flowers in the water. Instantly the tide took them and swept them away, one managed to sink, but thankfully the other didn't and Birdie grabbed it before it could.

There was a pause as Birdie inspected the flower with an almost childlike wonder. His eyes were big and shining as he looked let his fingers just gently graze over the flower's petals. Then, Birdie took a big sniff from the center of the flower in an almost cartoony fashion. Then he sneezed with a soft "Oh!" leaving his mouth as a result and he looked completely surprised by what just happened. His eyes wide, but gleeful at the same time.

Gilbert couldn't but laugh. "*Gesundheit*." He could respond before continuing. "You act like you've never seen a flower before."

"Well, that's because I haven't..." Birdie almost dreamily said as he continued to inspect and look at the soaked flower in his hands.

"What? You're joking!"

"I'm not... thank you, it's beautiful." And then Birdie put the flower behind his ear and smiled at Gilbert. It was the most beautiful thing Gilbert has ever laid his eyes on.

Gilbert quickly caught his raising blush with a cough. "Can I have your name now?" and he held his breath almost instantly.

Birdie looked out at the setting sun. "...Matthew, my name is Matthew."

"Alright!" Gilbert all but cheered with joy. Finally, he got his reward. "That's such an awesome name!"

"You think so?" Matthew softly questioned as he gave Gilbert an innocent look. Those big puppy dog eyes of his made Gilbert just want to hold Matthew and never let go.

"Of course," Gilbert gave Matthew a nervous smile before deciding to take off his boots and dip his feet into the warm water as the waves continued to move back and forth.

Matthew gave a smile and then he suddenly swam behind the rock, but he didn't leave, no, he chose to instead lay on his stomach on the rock. Yet it was still in a way that Gilbert couldn't see his legs or anything from the waist down. Gilbert wasn't focused on that though. No, now Matthew was laying down on his stomach and looked at him in such a way that made Gilbert's heart absolutely race.

His little birdie had his arms dangling lazily over the edge of the rock, and had a polite smile gracing his lips and he tore his gaze away from Gilbert to look down at his own reflection. His fingers just barely grazed the water's surface causing gentle ripples that eventually faded with the waves. It seemed like almost an eternity until one of them, Matthew, spoke again. "Hey... can I ask you something?"

"Of course! The awesome me will answer anything you throw my way!"

"Do you have siblings?"

"Oh, *ja*! I haven't told you about my little brother?" Gilbert ought to slap himself for that.

Matthew shook his head and smiled at Gilbert and lazily lulled his head so it rested against his arm. "No."

"*Ja, ja*! He's *mein* little brother. He's just a babe; only ten but smart as hell! Smarter than the awesome me! He makes all A's in school."

Matthew looked at Gilbert, his head tilted to the side in question. "What's a 'shooool'?"

"Uh..." Gilbert really didn't know how to respond to that. He blinked once and then looked at Matthew. "Seriously?" Was all Gilbert could spit out in his confusion. Matthew just nodded rather enthusiastically. "Okay... Well, a 'school'- school, not Shooool, is a place where children and teens go to learn."

"learn?"

"Wow, you must of have some super psycho parents or something, huh? Gilbert rubbed the back of his head.

It was like something had struck Matthew suddenly as his eyes went wide and he turned his head towards the water. "I have to go." His voice was monotone and honestly rather surprising to hear from someone so lively. "My-My father he's expecting me and I'm so late!" The sudden sense of urgency hit Gilbert rather hard. He knew that feeling all too well.

"Well, I could give you a ride, my car isn't-" Gilbert tried to offer a ride and he looked back towards the apartments where his car was parked, but while his head was turned he heard a sudden 'splash' and when he turned back around his little birdie seemed to have flown off- or

rather swam off. "Well... bye! I'll see you at the same time tomorrow!" Gilbert yelled out to the ocean. The only sound he got back was the sound of the waves hitting the shore.

"Awesome, Gil, just awesome..." He grimaced at all the wrong things he said in their conversation and only hoped that Matthew would meet him tomorrow.

Matthew smiled to himself as he held the soaked flower in the palm of both of his hands. Oh, how he wanted to keep it, but his father would have an absolute meltdown if he saw the flower. His father disapproved of humans so much it honestly made Matthew's stomach churn thinking about it sometimes. So, with a heavy heart, Matthew had no choice but to let the flower go and watch it float all the way back to the water surface.

Matthew looked down at his purple tail and frowned. It was no fun being confined to the ocean and the ocean only. He wanted to do what Gilbert does, he wanted to walk along the beach, feel the sand like Gilbert does, be... huma-like Gilbert was... Maybe Matthew wanted to go to this 'shool' that Gilbert talks about. But no, he was stick here, under the ocean.

Yeah, Matthew *should* be happy with everything he has and was given to him. After all, he is the son of one of the most powerful mermen in the ocean, but that didn't mean he was happy about it. Because he wasn't.

Matthew swam farther and farther down the ocean until his father's kingdom was in the distance. He swam a little faster once he was close-

"You're late!"

Matthew gasped to a halt as his brother, Liam, suddenly seemed to swim up to him out of nowhere. Oh yeah, he wasn't an only child either. No, Matthew had many, many siblings including, but not limited to Liam, A twin brother, a younger baby brother, and a sister.

Liam was more built than Matthew, with thick muscles and an intimidating nature, though he's usually rather laid-back he's usually more protective other his siblings. His tail color, liked Matthew, matched his eyes in a lovely seaweed color, something Matthew has always been a little jealous of. He always loved Liam's eyes.

"Yes, I'm aware, I just lost track of time." Matthew lied and tried to swim passed it brother, but it didn't work as Liam just as quickly got right back in front of Matthew.

"Oh, you lost track of time alright, you were up there again-" Liam pointed up to the far away surface of the ocean. "-Weren't you?"

"Psh, you're crazy. You know we're not allowed up there! If the humans saw us we'd be made into food or whatever."

Liam sighed with an eye-roll. "You're going to get caught if you keep going up there, you know?"

"But I'm not going up there." Matthew moved to the side and kept on swimming passed Liam. Liam huffed in annoyance and quickly managed to swim back up to Matthew.

Matthew thought that was the end of it until suddenly-

"Get down!" With no warning, Liam had grabbed Matthew and shoved him down behind a rock. Matthew gasped out in shock, but then suddenly Liam put his hand over Matthew's mouth silencing him. "Blend in." Liam hissed suddenly in a tone that told Matthew not to argue. He didn't. Matthew wiggled himself into the dirt this allowed his scales to start to blend in with the color of the sand. This made Matthew harder to see.

"What is it?" Matthew finally managed to whisper.

Liam was stiff and he poked his head up over the rock. "... Looks like one of Marius's guys..." Liam breathed out heavily.

"Petru?"

"No... must be a henchman..."

Matthew felt his heart start to race as he looked up to see who this henchman was. All he could see was the muddy brown tail before the other merman/maid. disappeared out of sight. Still, they stayed in place for a few more moments before they wiggled themselves out of the sand. Their tails still mimicking the color of the sand. It'll be that way for a while. Liam looked in the direction the henchman went. "Liam?" Matthew looked at his brother.

"Look, just go back to Pops. Tell him what we saw, I'm going to go make sure that prick is gone and out of our territory."

"Be careful?"

"Always!"

With that Liam zipped away quickly, leaving only a trail of bubbles behind him. Matthew sucked in a deep breath and turned the opposite way towards his home. As the sun was seeping through the waves, Matthew's tail started to return to its purple hue. Still, Matthew didn't hesitate to return home this time. Though as he was swimming home he couldn't help but think about Marius.

Who was Marius? Well, the odd thing was that Matthew didn't really know. Just that he and his father were once good friends. Once.

All Matthew truly knew was that something caused a rift between the two of them and ever since there's been this war going on.

Matthew flicked his tail and kept on going swimming not once looking back. He smiled once he was back in with the rest of his kind. Of course, nobody even paid him too much mind, he didn't care anyway. He saw their home, an old abandoned ship once owned by humans, now a home for them and their ever-growing family it seemed.

As he was coming up to his father's room, the main cabin of the whole ship, he could already hear the yelling. The high pitched voice told him that Peter was throwing one of his classic tantrums again.

"I said no!" Came his father's roaring voice.

'Oh great, he's already angry.' Matthew shook his head and decided to wait outside for the argument to halt. Peter is Matthew's youngest brother. The tiniest of the lot, still growing.

"You never let me do anything!"

"Peter, what your asking for is ridiculous! I'm doing everything I can to protect, not just you, but my whole family!"

"I just want to go to the surface! I want to look at the humans-"

"No! For the last time! *No!* It's bad enough I have Alfred and Matthew going up there willynilly-"

'He knows?!'

"-But I will not allow you to go and gawk at-at those *killers!*"

Peter let out a sudden sob "You're such a bully!" Matthew hardly had time to doge Peter's tiny form.

There was a moment of silence. Matthew couldn't bring himself to go into his father's room. Not yet anyway. Well, ready or not, his father knew he was there with a simple word.

"Matthew."

Quietly Matthew poked his head through the doorway at his father. His dad was looking out the window. His sand-colored hair gleaming against the glass of the window. His seaweed colored eyes just being able to reflect against the glass, and even though he wasn't looking directly at Matthew, Matthew felt uneasy and a sense of judgment coming off of him. His green tail almost seemed to sparkle as a bit of sunlight streaked through the window. "Where is Liam?" His dad questioned slowly.

"One of Marius's men was spotted nearby, Liam chased them off."

"Good, at least *one* of my sons is doing some good."

Matthew ducked his head down.

"You've been to the surface again, haven't you?"

Matthew opened his mouth but nothing could come out. Instead, he just let his head guiltily hang.

"Do I not have rules? What is with almost every one of my children thinking they could do whatever they want?" His father finally turned around to face him. Matthew felt his father's hands gently cup both of his cheeks and force him to look into his father's eyes. He looked rather disappointed in Matthew at that moment. "The last thing I want is you guys being on the end of a fishing rod."

"I just..."

"No more."

Matthew felt his shoulders slump and he focused more on the ground than on his father.

"You'll thank me someday, these humans you, Peter, and Alfred seem to be obsessed with are no good. Their killers and they'll kill you the moment they see your tail."

"...Where is Alfred?" Matthew decided to just change the subject. His father frowned as a result.

"Like Peter, he stormed off..." His father sighed out loud and let go of Matthew's face. "You may go now..." His father dismissed him with a flick of the wrist while he turned to look out of the busted window.

Matthew went to leave but stopped for just a moment. "They, the humans, they're not all that bad-"

"Go. Matthew."

Matthew didn't even know why he bothered, it was like talking to the sand beneath their tails. So, with a flick of his tail, he left his father's room. He swam on away from the ship. A shadow passed over him and he saw Liam returning and reporting to their father. When Matthew looked forward again he saw Peter laying in the sand just a little way away from their home. He could see that Peter had something in his hands, but Matthew couldn't see what exactly. Matthew put his hands behind his back as he cautiously spoke. "Peter, Watcha got there?"

Peter swam up and hid whatever he had behind his back. His eyes were red from crying and his tail suddenly changed to match the sand. (Matthew could only think he startled him)
"None of your business! Hmph!" With that, Peter took off as fast as his tail could take him. Matthew just watched his youngest brother retreat and just shook his head.

"Alright then..."

Just one day

Chapter Notes

You know what I don't see a lot of? Brotherly Canada to Sealand. I mean technically they are brothers (Even if Sealand now lives with Sweden and Finland canonically) I feel like out of everyone Canada would treat Sealand the nicest but that's just a headcanon I guess lol.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Days passed.

It killed Matthew inside with each passing day. He knew Gilbert was probably feeling betrayed by Matthew's sudden disappearance and knowing that made Matthew just ache. Yeah, he tried to cheer himself up with his thoughts '*he's probably already forgotten about you.*' but in all reality that just made him feel *worse*.

So, it really shouldn't be said that he fell into a bit of a depressive funk because of this. He wasn't actively helping about as he used to, in fact, he was pretty sure he hadn't moved from his room. (Just the bottom of the ship he liked the feeling of the sand on his scales) He just wanted to race up to the surface and find Gilbert so he could at least explain why he couldn't see him anymore, but he knew he couldn't do that. He didn't know where Gilbert lived and he doubts Gilbert would be coming to the beach anytime soon.

Matthew quietly moved his fingers amongst the wet and soggy sand beneath him and sighed, a couple of air bubbles leaving his mouth. His eyes gazed up, the surface just up there begging for him to come up and mingle with the humans. He's been watching the humans since he was Peter's age, he never dared to approach them the way he had Gilbert though. He watched them sing, make fires on the beach, cook, and even dance.

He wanted to dance. He remembered seeing two humans twirling and how they connected themselves it seemed so fun to Matthew. It's not like he could ever do what they did. Not with his tail. He also didn't have his father's magic, none of his siblings did, so it's not like he could give himself these legs. Just for one day, he wanted to be like them and experience their world for himself and not just watch from the distance.

"...Dumb bully!"

Matthew sighed in annoyance. Whereas he had accepted the permeant ban to the surface his brother, Peter, has not and has been kicking up a fuss about it every day since. As for his twin brother Alfred... Matthew honesty hasn't seen him in a long time, but that was nothing new to him. Alfred liked to run off for weeks on end whenever he and dad got into a screaming match, he'd usually come back either escorted by Liam, or by himself.

"Peter." Matthew found himself calling out for his youngest brother as Peter passed his room. There was a pause before a clearly enraged Peter showed himself to Matthew. Matthew moved slightly and patted the sand next to him. "Let's talk." Peter sighed as he came in and then sat down next to Matthew. "What's wrong, Peter, why are you antagonizing dad?"

"He doesn't understand a thing! He thinks he knows everything and he doesn't!"

"He just wants to protect us-"

"But the humans aren't bad, I know this, you know this, Alfred knows this."

"Peter-"

"You know I'm right." Peter looked at Matthew with big round eyes.

Matthew looked down after a few seconds. "Yeah, I know. They really don't seem to be that dangerous."

"See!"

"But still, dad asked us-"

"Alfred-"

"Matthew."

"Don't you ever just want to rebel?" Peter asked him with a dead serious face. "Aren't you tired of listening to him and his stupid rules!? It's not right, there's a whole world up there that he doesn't want us to experience!"

"I know..." Matthew looked up towards the surface. "I want to be with them more than anything. They seem like they have everything figured out while we're down here... but maybe dad has a reason for his hatred of humans, he has to, right?"

"Or maybe he's just being a bully and doesn't want us to choose the humans over him."

Matthew looked back at Peter and Peter had his eyes downcast and was looking at the sand. "Peter... I'm sure dad has his reasons."

Peter then made a face at Matthew that showed nothing less than disgust. "Keep talking like that and you'll end up just like Liam. Doing everything he says without even thinking about it! Well, I'm not going to be like Liam or you! I'm my own being!" And with his anger now taking over Peter fled in a huff leaving behind just bubbles.

Matthew only sighed and sat back down in the sand. *'That could have gone better... I'm **not** going to end up like Liam. I mean Liam is his own person and a great brother...'* Matthew glanced back up at the surface and then laid down in the sand. *'But to listen to what dad says without question... is that the life I really want?'*

It had been a grand total of two days since Matthew and Peter spoke and it's actually been rather quiet around the ship. Matthew was honestly finally coming out of his funk and starting to help around again. A little bit at a time. He was in the middle of helping a turtle get untangled from a net when Liam came up to him. "Dad needs to speak to you." Matthew hummed and used his teeth to cut the turtle free. The turtle was thankful enough and swam off.

"What's wrong with him now?" Matthew questioned as he started to shred the net up just enough so it wouldn't get tangled around another animal.

"I don't know. He's called a meeting with everyone."

Matthew dropped the net and sighed out. *'Probably a group meeting about the humans, I'm sure.'* Matthew thought and then just nodded at his brother. "Lead the way."

With that, he and his brother went off towards the ship. Thankfully it wasn't too far away and they made it to their father, who was actually waiting for them outside, along with his older sister, Lillie, and ... nobody else. This wasn't good. "Good, you two are here." His father sighed out once Matthew and Liam came up to him.

"Where is everyone else?" Matthew asked.

"... I don't know... that's what this meeting is about. Alfred never returned and, after our last fight a couple days ago, neither has Peter. Both of them are missing and I was hoping that maybe one of them would have confided in you, Matthew."

Matthew shook his head. "No, I talked to Peter a few days prior but he never mentioned anything about leaving and I haven't seen Alfred since before he got into the fight with you," Matthew explained and his father frowned.

"I was afraid of that..." His father put his finger to his chin in thought. "I know Alfred would leave for long periods of time, but I had Lillie out searching for him in his usual hide-outs and he's nowhere to be seen."

"Maybe he finally got smart enough not to hide in the same spot every time?" Matthew suggested.

"I thought that too... but then Peter never came home."

"I'm sure he's just probably hiding out, learned it from Alfred, no doubt." Liam thought as he crossed his arms.

"As true as that may be... I have an inkling it might be something darker, something I feared would happen." His father pinched the bridge of his nose. Lillie, Liam, and Matthew all shared a look with each other before they focused back on their father. "I'm not the only one with magical abilities in this ocean." That caught their attention. "Marius. He also has magic, it might not be as strong as mine, but it's strong enough to-" He paused for a moment and looked down at the sand before he looked back up at his children. "-It's strong enough to turn us human."

"They wouldn't! Yeah, they may be dumb and impulsive, but to go to our enemy-" Liam gasped out at the mere thought.

"I think that's exactly what happened. Peter has been begging me to go to the surface and Alfred- ugh, don't get me started on that... I think they both thought they were being clever by going behind my back. Well, I'm not standing for it! Someone needs to go to the surface and get them back."

"What if they aren't on the surface?" Liam inquired.

"I'm willing to bet they absolutely are."

"..." Liam looked at Lillie and Matthew. Matthew looked at Lillie as he put his hand over his heart. "I'll do it." Liam finally spoke up-

"No. That's the thing. I need you and Lillie here, someone has to look out for Marius's men odds are he'll be planning an attack soon." Their father quickly shot it down. "You're the best I have for fending his men off."

Matthew felt his heart absolutely skip a beat once he realized what that meant. "Wait then that leaves me-"

"Yes... it seems it does." His father cut him off. "This isn't a vacation, Matthew, you need to take this absolutely seriously and bring your brothers back."

"O-Of course!" Matthew gasped. He was finally getting his wish of getting legs? Of walking amongst the humans, even if just for a day?

"Father are you sure it has to be Matthew? No offense." Lillie piped up.

"None taken."

"Absolutely. As I said, Marius will no doubt be planning some sort of attack while we're down like this. I need you both here with me, I'll also need to see about calling for aid."

Silence as Lillie and Liam looked at Matthew. Matthew tried to not look too excited on the outside, but on the inside he was absolutely giddy with excitement. Was this really happening?!

"Matthew?" His father spoke in a cool tone that made Matthew look at him. "Are you up for this?"

Matthew looked at his father for a few passing seconds before nodding, at first slowly, before nodding eagerly and excited. "Yes! Of course!"

His father only smiled. "I had a feeling you'd say that... alright, Lillie and Liam I need you to back away, but not leave, because I'm probably still going to need you." They both nodded and swam a little ways away together while Matthew stayed with his father. Matthew's heart was pounding away in his chest while his throat felt like it was going to close up, he couldn't believe this was actually happening! *'Thank Peter and Alfred when you find them.'* He made a

mental note. "Matthew." Matthew looked at his father, that's when his father's hands started to glow a beautiful shade of green, almost the same color as his father's eye. "Hold still!"

The ocean started to move around him and his father as a whirlpool started to swirl. Matthew felt his hair move in every which direction as the whirlpool became stronger and stronger. His instincts were telling him to curl up and shield himself, but he knew that his father wanted him to stay still. So he did just that. He looked at his father and the longer he did Matthew was starting to realize that the whirlpool was indeed getting stronger as the sea itself as the area around them started to go from blue to green. Matthew honestly just felt amazed as this was one of the few times he ever got to witness his father's magic first hand. It was almost mesmerizing.

Then it happened. First, his father struck him with some sort of magical ball of energy, it hit him dead in the chest. Then pain. He couldn't even begin to accurately describe the pain he felt when his tail started to *rip* in two. Granted the pain was brief, but it still, from the bottom up his tail ripped and the pain was searing as he could feel every rip and tear. Thankfully, as mentioned, the pain only lasted as quickly as it happened, but it wasn't completely over. He couldn't breathe nor could swim as he struggled in his spot, and he felt, for the first time ever, cold. The water was absolutely freezing.

He soon felt hands all over him and his father, sister, and brother all grabbed him and rushed him up to the surface. Matthew felt like his chest was going to explode. They, thankfully, made it to the surface just in time and the moment they broke through the water Matthew sucked in a deep needy breath. "Easy..." His father breathed as the three of them helped Matthew to the shore. "Just breathe, lad." His father patted his back.

Soon they got Matthew to the beach and once close enough Matthew actually tried to stand up. His knees wobbled and before he could take his first, off-balance, step he fell face-first into the sand. The sand wasn't wet, it was dry and clung to his body in every which way. Matthew looked at his left hand, the hand and arm with most sand on it, and just stared in wonder. "Are you sure this is going to work, Pop?" Liam had been the one to break the silence between the three of them.

"It has to, Matthew!" His father snapped his fingers gaining Matthew's attention. Matthew looked at his father and actually realized that for the first time in a long time they weren't facing each other when talking as his father and he had some distance now and they were rather blurry to look at. "Remember. Bring your siblings back. Now, I'm sure you're curious about how long this will last. The spell will last as long as you don't go back into the ocean and I'm willing to bet Marius's is the exact same."

Matthew tried to stand again but his knees wobbled too much and soon he found himself sitting under his legs. *Legs! He has legs!*

"Are you listening?" Matthew looked back at his father and silently nodded. "Well, then. I'm living it up to you to find your brothers. Bring them back safe, and like I said. Once your legs dry you'll be fine as long as you don't go back into the ocean. Understood?"

"Yes!" Matthew finally found his voice.

"Good, be safe." With those final words, his dad went down under the water. Lillie followed but Liam stayed.

"Matthew, stay out of trouble, I can't protect you out there, you know that right?"

"Of course, I don't need you to protect me anymore, Liam."

Liam gave a small little rueful smile before just nodding. "Right. Be careful." With that Liam disappeared amongst the waves. This left Matthew alone on the beach looking out at the setting sun. Quietly he shifted his newfound legs out from under him and tried to stand up. His knees knocked together and he just couldn't get his balance right and before he knew it he was back tasting the sand. Matthew made a face as he brought his head up and spat the gritty sand out of his mouth.

Matthew lifted himself up off of the ground and looked down at his legs and feet. For a moment he just wiggled his toes as he thought about how he was going to do this.

"Uh...Sir?" A voice to his left made him turn his head towards the voice. It was a person that had caught his attention. Like with his father and siblings they were rather far and thus hard to see. Whoever this person was, Matthew could only see that they had a darker skin and hair color and they looked to be larger in size as well. The person rather cautiously got closer.

"Are... you okay?" This person asked and Matthew only tilted his head to the side in question. When Matthew didn't respond this person tried a new tactic. "Do you need help, *Amigo*?" and in a moment of kindness, this man got a little more closer and offered his hand for Matthew to take.

Now that the person was closer Matthew could see him better. His hair was long and in dreads and his eyes matched his hair color, he had a bit of stubble on his chin, as well as thick eyebrows. Matthew hesitated for a moment before taking this stranger's hand. The stranger helped him to his feet and like before his legs wobbled as he went off balance and went crashing into this stranger. "Okay, easy does it." With that, the man went and draped his jacket over Matthew's shoulders. "Do you have a name?" The man helped straighten Matthew out so at least now he wasn't wobbling about. The jacket was well appreciated as well as Matthew was becoming cold.

"Matthew..."

"Matthew, alright. I'm Máximo. Is there a reason you're like this?"

"Uh..."

"Butt naked on the beach unable to walk right? Do you need a hospital?"

Matthew shook his head. "I'm fine."

"You really don't seem fine... do you have any clothes at all?"

Matthew shook his head.

"Do you have anywhere to go?"

"Go?"

"To sleep or live?"

Matthew didn't really think about that. So he just shook his head again. "No." Máximo frowned at this.

"Well then... I guess that's a bit of a problem isn't it?" Máximo questioned softly. He then looked Matthew up and down for a few seconds of silence between the two of them. Matthew honestly took this moment to try and balance himself out better so he wasn't face planting into the sand every five seconds. He used Máximo to help steady himself out and this didn't go unnoticed as when Matthew tried to take a step Máximo was there to catch him before he fell again. "Okay... Easy there." Máximo breathed out. "I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if I just left you out here by yourself. C'mon, grab my arm." Matthew did as he was told and wrapped himself around Máximo's arm. Matthew found it much easier to walk like this.

"My car isn't far. You can stay with me for the night. We'll figure out what to do with you in the morning."

I hope this chapter was alright. I had to rewrite the start like 5 times lol.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this chapter was alright. I had to rewrite the start like 5 times lol.

Questions

Gilbert bit on the end of his pen as he looked at his bills to pay this week. Rent and water were the main priorities which were a bit of a problem. He only had enough money for one of those three things. If he went for Rent it'd take all he had for the week. "Damn." He cursed and leaned back in his seat before he bit on the pen again. He kept the pen in his mouth and wiggled it up and down as he thought. Still, he knew the rent was more important than anything. But did he really want to go without water till next week? Why were apartments so expensive?

"*Burder.*" A little voice cut Gilbert's thoughts short and he looked over his shoulder at his ten-year-old brother, Ludwig. Ludwig seemed to have just crawled out of bed as he was in his pajamas with his little gray cat clutched to his side. Ludwig yawned loudly; Gilbert looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost midnight.

"Now-" Gilbert put his pen down and in one quick sweeping motion and stood up and picked Ludwig up. "-You shouldn't be up." Gilbert grinned before booping Ludwig's nose. Ludwig made a face as he scrunched his nose up.

"I couldn't sleep," Ludwig whined slightly.

"Oh, I'm sorry. But you need to go back to bed now. You have school tomorrow."

"Can I see Feliciano tomorrow? After school." Ludwig asked as Gilbert carried him back to his bedroom.

"Ah, I'm not sure about that one, buddy. I know you're his friend and all but he's going through a lot right now." Gilbert explained the best he could as he laid Ludwig back down in his bed. '*A lot. a lot.*' Gilbert shook his head. Feliciano's situation was messy to say the least.

"Is it because Lovino is fighting with Mr. Rodrich and Elizaveta?" Of course, it wasn't a secret. Feliciano can't keep a secret to save his life.

'Fighting' was such a loose term to use. It was an absolute wreck that split Gilbert's friends apart.

Feliciano is the same age as Ludwig whereas his brother, Lovino, is the same age as Gilbert, twenty-five. After their grandfather died Feliciano was forced into a foster home as Lovino was in college. That's where Rodrich and Elizaveta took him in. Now here's the issue: Lovino obviously wants his brother back and is on his last semester of college, but Rodrich and Elizaveta wanted to adopt him. What really didn't help was Antonio's involvement.

Antonio is one of Gilbert's best friends, but he's driving a wedge between Gilbert and himself as he's now siding with Lovino stating that Feliciano should be with his family and not with Rodrich. To the point that Antonio was trying to convince Gilbert to pick a side. Gilbert couldn't do it and he won't. He told both parties respectfully that this was 'unawesome' and he didn't want to be dragged into it. He'll happily talk to them about their problems but he wasn't

picking a side. It was nothing short of a giant legal mess and poor Feliciano was caught in the middle of it.

Maybe Gilbert could convince Rodrich to give Feliciano over for a few hours or so. Poor kid probably needed a break.

"You don't need to worry about that. I'll see what I can do. Now get to bed."

"Okay..." With defeat in his voice, Ludwig turned over to his side and tried to get some sleep.

Gilbert left his brother's room soon after. Gilbert got lucky adopting his own little brother. Their father, bless him, died just a few years back of cancer. Gilbert had no intention of going to college so it was super easy for him to get his brother in his custody. He's doing his best, and was honestly super surprised when Ludwig made friends with Feliciano they were both in the same class and according to Ludwig:

"Some fifth graders tried to beat him up! The moment they saw me they went running for the hills!"

Look at his little brother being Feliciano's protector. It was rather cute and bizarre as Feliciano and Ludwig seemed to be opposites personality-wise. Ludwig was always striving to be his best and doing everything he could to get good grades... Feli... well Feliciano likes art class... He's not so good with his other classes from what Rodrich has been telling Gilbert.

Gilbert sat back down at the small round dining table and looked back down at his bills. Water or Rent?

"Rent is always more important..." He decided finally and signed off on the check. He'd give it to the landlord tomorrow. Then he'll go to the store and pick up some purified water. Those weren't too expensive and he could at least afford that.

It took a good long while for Matthew to finally get used to walking and standing alike. Máximo was patient in teaching him, but it was clear that his patience was wearing thin near the end as his tone became a little more angry and frustrated. "Have you never walked before?!" Was the last question Máximo asked him.

"No," Matthew answered honestly. The room became quiet after that but it was clear that Máximo's thoughts changed after that. He became a little more soft-spoken and gentler. Eventually, they got it and Matthew wanted to do nothing more than to run around in circles, but it was discouraged against.

He didn't just stop there either. Máximo gave him some clothes. They were so warm and large! So large that the pants Máximo gave him dropped off of his waist and on the floor in an instant and the shirt was practically draping off of his body. Máximo made a face but helped Matthew.

"This-" Máximo held up something. It was long and looked to be made out of some sort of tough material, it almost looked like a black eel. "-is called a belt. You use it to hold your

pants up. Like this." With a simple movement, Máximo wrapped the belt around Matthew's pants. Through the loops, he noted, tightened it as tight as it could go, and buckled. "Unfortunately, I can't do much about the shirt."

"It's so comfortable!" Matthew couldn't help but twirl. "Thank you! This means a lot to me!"

"Right... Now, Matthew... can I ask you a few questions?"

Matthew looked at the shirt with excitement and nodded to Máximo, not noticing the uncomfortable look on his face. "Sure. Ask away?"

"Okay." Máximo sucked in a slow breath before starting. "Do you have any family around here?"

Matthew thought about his answer for a moment. It wouldn't be lying if he kept it vague, right? "Yes! I have a dad, three brothers, and a sister."

"Great!" Máximo exclaimed so suddenly that Matthew blinked at him in confusion. "That's great. Where do they live? Can I take you home tonight and maybe get this whole mess cleaned up? I mean they have to worried sick about you." Máximo continued to ask making Matthew look at him. To the best of his abilities as Máximo was rather far and blurry as a result.

"I... can't tell you where they live, but they're not worried about me-"

"Look, *amigo*. It's not safe out there. Not to someone like you."

"Like me?" Matthew put a hand on his chest a little offended. "What's wrong with me."

"Nothing."

"Well, regardless, they're not worried. My dad wanted this for me. He needs me here, that's what he told me."

"*Dios Mio...*" Máximo sat down with his hand over his mouth in shock. "It's worse than I thought." He whispered more to himself than to Matthew. Matthew tilted his head in question. What was he talking about? "Y-your siblings are okay with this?" He questioned after a few seconds of stunned silence.

"Well... the other two were, they're with dad. But I'm here to find two of my brothers!"

"That's great and good! They're here in town?"

"That's what I'm hoping for!" Matthew smiled.

"Do you have pictures- what am I saying? You were naked when I found you. What do they look like? I'll help you find them." Máximo took Matthew's hands in his own. Matthew's hands were so tiny compared to Máximo's.

"You will!? Máximo, thank you. That means a lot to me."

"Of course. Then I'll tell them what your father's done. It can't be forgiven."

"Eh?"

"Don't worry about it, *Mateo*. I'll be right back okay? Make yourself comfortable, I need to make a phone call." Máximo let go of Matthew's hands and went off towards another room in his house. Matthew shrugged his comment off. Maybe it was a human thing? His father didn't do anything wrong though. Still, while Máximo was away Matthew took it upon himself to look around the home.

It was a tiny home with two bedrooms and an odd room that Matthew didn't know what its purpose was used for. Humans were odd. They sat on soft things called 'couches' and they slept on even softer things called beds. It was all so bizarre for Matthew to grasp. He walked over to a tiny table in front of the couch. Humans liked tables it seemed. They had tables for eating and tiny tables for laying stuff on it seemed. Matthew grabbed one of the things that belong to Máximo that was on this tiny table. It looked like a shirt, but bigger than that. It wasn't like the shirt Matthew was wearing as it didn't have a middle? Just two armholes?

So, Matthew slipped it on over his shoulders. Oversized it was. On Matthew's tiny frame it almost reached the floor, the sleeves went way past his hands and flopped about with any movement he made. It was so cozy that he didn't want to take it off. Ever. There was just one odd thing about it though. Why did it have a big opening? Why didn't it cover all of him like the shirt did. So, he took it off.

Matthew turned it around to look at it better. *'of course! I had it backward!'* He kicked himself for the simple mistake and put it on the 'right way'. He slipped his arms through it and grinned. Perfect! It was even cozier this way. Like he was engrossed in the warmest sands. Matthew then noticed something as he looked down. There were these slits in the giant shirt. Did he stick his hands in them? It seemed like it. So, he did so. Both hands in both slits.

His right hand touched something cold and hard. "Huh? What's this?" He quietly pulled it out of the slit. It was shiny! So shiny! Like mentioned it was cold and hard. It had a weird shape to it, flat, but also bumpy. It almost reminded Matthew of the sun in its coloring. *'It's shiny like a fish... is it food?'* Matthew sniffed it. It had no scent. His stomach growled telling Matthew that he should probably eat soon. So, he did what he thought was best. He bit it.

"Youch!" Matthew whined. His teeth did not like that! Did he bite into a rock?

"What's wrong-" Máximo came back from his room. A strange thin object in his hand and a book... right? Was he writing a book? Máximo paused and looked Matthew up and down. Seemingly taking in what he was seeing. *"Amigo-"*

"Your shiny thing hurt my teeth," Matthew explained as he handed the shiny thing back to Máximo. "It's not food."

"Sweet Jesus..." Máximo rolled his eyes and took the shiny thing back. "No. It's not food. It's my badge actually."

"Badge?"

"My police badge- don't worry. I'm here to help. I mean it. I'm not like those other cops, and right now I'm making it my mission to protect you. Alright? But I'm going to need to ask some more questions. More specifically on your brothers. I meant it when I said I'd help you find them. Now. What do they look like?"

New faces and more questions

Máximo only watched as Matthew slept peacefully on his couch, the teen curled up with the pillow that was supposed to be for his head in his arms. Matthew smiled in his sleep and Máximo only shook his head. Máximo picked up the blanket that had fallen on the floor and draped it back over Matthew's form. He then walked into the kitchen where The clock on the oven flashed 7:48 am.

He started up his coffee maker, the coffee already in the filter from the night before. It crackled to life and started to heat up, the smell of fresh Cuban coffee starting to fill his small apartment.

Usually, Máximo would eat at the station (A vending machine snack was his go-to.); now that he had a guest he decided to cook a proper breakfast. Bacon and scrambled eggs seemed good. He put the pan on the stove and let heat up. He grabbed the bacon and eggs from the fridge and set them on the counter. While waiting for the pan to heat he made himself a cup of coffee.

The bitter taste of the coffee helped him clear his head a little. He had to start thinking about what he was going to do. Obviously, take Matthew down to the station. Introduce him to a sketch artist to try and find his brothers... but then what? The kid was unstable; unhinged almost. He didn't know what basic things were and he couldn't even walk right! Máximo grabbed the bacon and placed it in the hot pan, instantly they started to sizzle and crackle. The aroma filled the air and made Maximo's mouth water.

Clearly, the smell attracted his guest because when Máximo turned around he saw Matthew standing there, blanket wrapped tightly around his shoulders. "Ah, good morning!" Máximo greeted Matthew with a smile before he focused back on the bacon before it burnt. He flipped them over when he became aware of a presence directly behind him. He didn't need to look over his shoulder to know that Matthew was right there watching his every movement with increased interest.

"I hope you like bacon and eggs."

"I never had it." Matthew breathed with excitement.

"*Never?!'*" Máximo gasped; his ears couldn't be hearing this.

"Never..."

"*Amigo...*" Máximo shook his head. "Well, we're changing that today."

"Can I help?"

"Uh..." Máximo really didn't want this kid around the stove. So, he decided to keep it simple. "Sure, why don't you set the table. Grab the plates in the cabinet up there. The dinner plates, not the saucers."

Matthew went to the cabinet in question and paused a look of confusion on his face. "Uh... These?" He grabbed the saucer in question.

"Not those, the bigger ones."

"Okay..." he put the saucer back and grabbed a stack of the bigger plates. Máximo couldn't stop his laughter from escaping his mouth.

"*Amigo*, how many people do you think are eating breakfast?" Máximo's laughter stopped when Matthew tilted his head quizzically at him. Máximo coughed in response. "We only need two plates, not the whole stack."

"Oh, alright." Matthew put the stack back and grabbed the two plates off the top. He didn't know what 'setting the table' truly entailed, but he figured he should put both plates on the large round table behind them.

"On the green placemats in front of the chairs," Máximo instructed as he flipped the bacon. It was clear that he was watching Matthew. Matthew didn't know what a placemat was, but judging by the fact that they were the only things that were green he put the plates on them.

"Good. Now we're going to need a couple of forks. They're in the drawer over by the fridge."

Matthew looked at Máximo.

"Right over there." Máximo pointed Matthew in the right direction. Matthew opened the drawer and saw many things in there, they were separated, but which one was a 'fork'? He grabbed the first thing and showed it to Máximo.

"This?"

"No, that's a butter knife. A fork has three -or four- prongs." Máximo gave a loud sigh showing that his temper was raising just a bit, and it was, but he knew better than to let it get the best of him.

"Oh." Matthew put the knife back and grabbed the 'fork'. He didn't know how many 'prongs' he was looking at, but it had multiple 'prongs' something the others didn't. So he grabbed two of them and placed them on the plates.

"Besides the plate. Not on."

"Ah." Matthew did as he was told and tilted his head. Humans were so weird.

Máximo started to whistle as he put the bacon on a plate. Once the pan was free of bacon he cracked two eggs in the pan. "I'm doing sunny-side-up if that's alright with you."

"... Sunny-side... up?" Matthew couldn't help but ask as he tilted his head. He watched as Máximo's face became uncomfortable.

"Don't worry about it. Alright, I'm sure you'll like It. Do you want... toast?"

"...Toast?"

"Okay... I'll just take that as a yes." Máximo huffed a little at that. "Just go and sit down, alright. Thanks for setting the table." So, Matthew did as he was told and he sat down at the table. He didn't say a word as Máximo finished cooking the eggs. He put two slices of bread in the toaster and let them toast while he plated one egg on each plate. He immediately saw Matthew going to touch the egg with hand. "No, *amigo!* It's hot!" Máximo yelled, granted he yelled a little louder than he should have because Matthew flinched like he was about to be hit. Instantly Máximo forced himself to lower his tone. "Sorry, I shouldn't have yelled. It's hot, you'll get burned- also you don't eat with your hands, you use the fork- also, also I'm not done setting up your plate."

"Oh. Okay." With no emotion in his voice, Matthew lowered his hand and waited patiently. Máximo quietly plated some bacon on Matthew's plate, then when the toast popped up he buttered it and gave both pieces to Matthew and put two more pieces in the toaster for himself. Even though his plate was made, Matthew still waited. Thankfully Máximo's toast didn't take too long to pop up and butter. Now both of their plates were made and Máximo moved his spot so he was next to Matthew, had a feeling that he was going to need to help this kid. *'How can he not know the basics. This is the weirdest abuse case I've encountered yet, what father just... locks their son up and doesn't teach him anything?'* Máximo grabbed his toast with his hand and popped his egg yolk with his fork. He then scooped up half his egg and put it on his toast. He folded the toast and was almost ready to take a bite when he noticed that Matthew was staring directly at him with intense, yet confused, eyes.

"...Can I help you?"

"... I thought you said we don't eat with our hands?"

"We don't-" Máximo became aware of the confusion when he looked down at the toast in his hands. "-Oh. *some things* we don't eat with our hands. Egg? No. Toast? Yes." He simplified it for Matthew. There a moment of confusion as Matthew looked at his food. Matthew carefully took the toast and sniffed it.

"It smells nice." He commented before taking a bite of the plain buttered toast. "Oh! It tastes nice!"

"Of course." Máximo would be lying if he didn't say that Matthew's excited face would make anyone's heart melt on sight. Matthew devoured his first slice of toast. "Before you eat the second one- try it like this." Máximo stopped Matthew from eating the second piece long enough for him to cut Matthew's egg for him and put it on the toast. "Fold it as I did- there you go." Matthew folded the bread in half and took a bite. Matthew paused for a moment before his eyes lit up.

"It's delicious."

Máximo laughed. Matthew inhaled the rest of his sandwich and paused for a moment. Máximo felt Matthew's intense gaze and couldn't place what the kid could be looking now, that was until he followed Matthew's gaze and saw him looking at his fork in between his

fingers. "Don't tell me..." Máximo sighed already knowing where this is going. Matthew ducked his head.

"I'm sorry-"

"It's not your fault. Here, let me show you..."

The good news was that this kid caught on quick. Well, kinda, he held the fork the way a toddler would, but he understood the concept. Watching him slowly lift the egg to his mouth and try to eat was interesting. Well first he did it by lifting the fork too high and trying to catch the food in his mouth, thankfully Máximo showed him the right way and he caught on. *'Thank goodness I got to him before any... unsavory people did. He's helpless.'* Máximo shook his head and bit into his bacon. *'Still, we should hurry up and get to the station, have a sketch artist look at the descriptions of those brothers of his and see what to do from there.'*

Máximo waited until Matthew was finished with his food and grabbed both plates. He put them in the sink and nodded. "Alright, let's go... Uh... here." Máximo pulled out his flip-flops. Simple. Easy. Nothing to explain. "Put these on your feet for now." He ordered before he put on his own work shoes.

"Okay..." Matthew complied and did as he was told. Thankfully he put them on the right feet. Máximo was in the middle of tying his shoes when he felt that intense stare again.

"...What?" Máximo sighed in annoyance as he looked at Matthew. Matthew quickly blushed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to annoy you! I was just... watching."

"I'll explain later, we need to get a move on."

"Okay!"

With a heavy sigh Máximo got to his feet and made sure he looked good in the mirror. "I like your hair." Matthew made a surprising comment before Máximo felt a slight tug on one of his dreads. Máximo coughed slightly.

"Thanks, you'd be the only one. My boss has been trying to get me to shave this mop for years."

"It doesn't feel like mine..."

"I'd imagine it wouldn't." Máximo laughed a little and started to roll his dreads into a bun.

"This is the only way my boss will let me keep these."

"Why can't you have them?" Matthew asked softly with a head tilt.

"Well, it's mainly because I look like-"

'-A hoodlum. a gangster! We can't have you looking like that!' His boss's chastising voice rang into his head. Máximo's temper nearly lost him his job that day. He got suspended but

the threat of getting a lawyer involved made his boss shut up and not fire him. He got to keep his dreads in the end.

"You look like?" Matthew blinked innocently at Máximo.

"It doesn't matter!" Máximo quickly changed the subject and replaced his tone with a cheerier one. "C'mon, I'm gonna be late for work."

"Alright. Lead the way."

Máximo did just that and he leaded Matthew out of the apartment. They had to go down three flights of stairs, Matthew did so one at a time, much like a toddler would. Máximo was starting to get impatient by the time he got down the third flight and Matthew was slowly making his way down the steps. Eventually, Máximo sighed in annoyance and then quickly stepped up the steps and literally picked Matthew up by wrapping his arms under Matthews's butt and hauling the teen over his shoulder like he was nothing. The kid was light.

"Whoa!" Matthew gasped in surprise. He's never been held like this before!

"Sorry, *amigo*, but Imma be late! We have to get a move on."

"Okay!" Matthew just allowed this as he was carried down the rest of the stairs. Matthew watched Máximo. Once they got to the ground Máximo put Matthew down to his feet. "This way." Matthew followed right behind Máximo and looked down at his own feet. The shoes on his feet slapped up and down and made noises with each step he made. It was so weird.

"C'mon!" Máximo grabbed Matthew by his wrists and urged him to walk faster. Matthew followed and tried to keep up the pace that Máximo wanted. Matthew noted how different this place looked in the day versus yesterday. There were lots of people out and about. Too many of them for Matthew to just focus on one person that wasn't Máximo. Especially since Máximo was urging him to forward so he wouldn't be late.

They made it to his car and Matthew pulled on the handle but it didn't open. There was an audible 'click' and Matthew pulled again, the door opened now. Matthew got in and So did Máximo. Máximo was quick and buckled Matthew into his seat before doing the same.

"It's warm in here..." Matthew felt weird, the air wasn't fresh, and it was hot and stuffy.

"Yeah, that's summer for you."

Máximo started driving down the road and Matthew glued himself to the window. There were so many things to look at! People, so many people! They were out walking and doing their normal everyday life. They talked to one another, walked from one building just to go into another building. They'd come out of these buildings with big bags hanging off their arms and some would have weird things pressed to their ears. It all so new to him and he just tried to take in as much as he possibly could. It was showing some difficulty though, the people were blurry and he couldn't see that far away. It's been like this since he went to the surface and he'd like to be able to see regularly again.

He was so focused on watching the people that he never really paid attention to where they were going. Each twist and turn sent him to somewhere new that he just had to look at.

"... You're kinda quiet there, kid," Máximo spoke in a soft tone.

"I just want to take it all in," Matthew responded back as he smiled at Máximo. "This is the first time I've ever seen anything like this."

"You don't say... So your father is a real Mother Gothel, huh?"

"Mother Gothel?"

"From *Rapunzel*?"

"Rapunzel?"

"... Never mind." Máximo gave a bit of a sigh before focusing back on his driving. Matthew went back to window gazing but was stopped at the sound of ticking. The car came to a halt and he looked around to see what was causing the ticking.

"What's that noise? Are we there?"

"No, a few more blocks to go, and you're probably hearing my blinker."

"Oh okay... What's a blinker?"

"Goddammit... It's just showing the other drivers that I'm turning." He bluntly explained to Matthew, who just shrugged in response.

"... If we aren't there, then why did we stop?"

"Because I'm at a red light."

"... Red light-"

"-It just means I can't go! Red means stop!" Máximo growled in annoyance and Matthew ducked his head down, feeling bad that he had caused Máximo so much annoyance. So, he decided to just keep his mouth shut for the rest of the ride. He'll ask questions at another time. In the meantime, he kept looking out the window and watching the people. Didn't these people know how lucky they are? To live on the surface and be face to face with one another? Not be locked to the sea until the day they die?

Matthew sighed happily and Máximo gave him the side-eye but said nothing. He could only rest his head against the window and feel its vibration as it moved.

"Okay-" Máximo stopped the car again. Matthew figured they were at a red light, but Máximo coughed, gaining Matthews's attention once more. "We're here."

"Alright!" Matthew tried to remove the seatbelt, but it didn't want to budge. He tried twisting and turning every which way, but the seatbelt just wouldn't give up without a fight it seemed. Matthew pouted.

"Here-"

"No." Matthew felt stubborn and slapped Máximo's hand away. "I can figure it out." He told Máximo before he looked down at the belt in question. Máximo did this yesterday too and helped Matthew out of this situation. But, how did he? He looked at where Máximo had buckled it and moved it about a bit. It didn't move. Matthew almost wanted to ask for help, almost, but he saw the red part of the buckle and pushed it down. It worked! Matthew felt happy, he did something himself!- Then he got hit in the face by the seatbelt in question. "Ow!" He yelled and rubbed the spot on his cheek that got hit.

Máximo let out a sudden and barking laugh. "I-I-!" He sniggered and he tried to speak but the giggles kept raising up. Matthew frowned and crossed his arms and waited for him to stop his laughter. "I'm sorry, really. I am, but that was just too funny- you just let the belt hit you!" He kept laughing before he finally managed to quell his laughter down. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not." Matthew playfully laughed before he opened the door and got out. Máximo followed suit and Matthew looked at the building in front of them. "It's huge!"

"Heh, if you say so." Máximo led Matthew into the building, keeping his hand firmly on Matthew's back to help guide him through.

There were so many people! So many that Matthew realized that he was having trouble seeing them all. He could see the closer ones but as stated earlier, he couldn't see that far away before his vision became blurry. "Whatcha' got there, Maxi?" Came a voice to Matthew's left causing him to turn his head. He couldn't see this person without squinting his eyes.

This guy was tall and had blonde spikey hair. That's all Matthew could see from how far this guy was. He did seem to be wearing the same outfit as Máximo. "Andersen," Máximo grunted a greeting. "I found him out by the beach; his name is Matthew."

"The beach, huh? Drunkard?" Andersen laughed at Matthew, who just tilted his head in question.

"No, nothing like that. I need to speak the chief about him actually."

"Oh? Well, you know where to find him. Should I take Matthew to a cell then?"

"No." Máximo's voice was firm as he gave Matthew a protective push back. "He's not in trouble."

"Alright, should I take him to the teddy room then?"

"Teddy room?" Matthew finally spoke up.

Máximo seemed to be weighing his options for a moment. "No. Not yet. Wait till Dr. Bock gets in."

"Understood."

With those parting words, Máximo led Matthew into the building some more. He couldn't make out any faces as most people were too far for him to see their faces more accurately. Maybe he should say something to Máximo? Matthew was about to tell his friend that he couldn't see, but before he could he was pushed into a chair. Máximo went over to this big screen and started to hit buttons. It was some sort of screen like the TV Máximo showed him last night, only it seemed to be reacting to what Máximo was pushing on the button board below. "Okay, I'm on the clock. I need to talk to my boss, stay here. Don't move from this spot. Understood?"

"kay." Matthew blinked.

"I mean it."

"I won't move! I swear."

"Okay. Stay there."

Máximo walked away and Matthew watched him leave- that was until Matthew couldn't see him anymore as Máximo became a blurry figure.

So, Matthew did as he was instructed and he sat there obediently. Minutes passed and Matthew was starting to become rather bored. So, imagine his surprise when he twisted in the seat and the seat moved with his body. "It... spins?" So, he spun the seat around. At first slow before using the desk to help him spin around faster. Maybe he would have kept this up for longer if someone hadn't have grabbed the chair, forcing him to stop. "Now, I know you aren't Máximo."

Matthew looked up into a woman's face. She was close enough to where he could see her properly. She had blonde hair that seemed to be held back with a green ribbon. Her eyes matched the color of the ribbon. Like Máximo and Andersen she too was wearing the same dark blue outfit. "I'm Matthew, a pleasure to meet you, ma'am." Matthew has seen humans do this, so he stuck his right hand out. She didn't take it. So he let it drop.

"I'm Emma. Can I ask why you're in my partner's seat?" Her tone was flat but accusatory.

'Partner?... are they together? Máximo never mentioned he had a mate... does she think we're together?!' Matthew quickly wanted to defuse the situation. "Oh! It's no big deal really, Máximo left me so he could go and talk to his Chief."

"Okay, then why did he leave you here? Why are you in his chair and not in that chair?" She pointed to the smaller chair just across the desk.

Matthew felt confused and just looked back at her. "Does it really matter?"

Anyone would have thought that Matthew just slapped her by the shocked look on her face. "Yes, it matters. Are you here to be questioned? Why aren't you in cuffs? And why are you wearing his clothes?!"

"What are cuffs?"

"I'm about to show you if you don't knock it off."

Matthew felt worried for a moment, what had he done to make her mad? "I'm sorry-"

"-Emma." Thankfully Máximo came back. "Easy, it's alright. He's with me."

"Why?" She challenged. "What's going on here, Máximo?" She demanded.

"Máximo-" A new voice cut in. This voice had a thicker accent and sounded rather different than Máximo's or Emma's. Matthew turned around and jeez! He thought Andersen or Máximo were tall, they were nothing compared to this guy. He was *tall*. He wasn't in blue like everyone else, rather he had on a white shirt and black pants. His hair was a silvery blonde and his eyes almost seemed to be purple in color. He had a rather large nose that stood out.

"Yes, Chief Braginsky?" Máximo questioned as he put a hand on Matthew's shoulder.

The man smiled at Matthew in question. "Why don't you take your friend to the Teddy room? So he won't be such a distraction to everyone else, *Da?*"

"Yeah. Will do, Come on, Mattie."

"Okay?" Matthew stood and followed Máximo quickly. Máximo grabbed Matthew's hand to lead him better. "I didn't mean to make that woman mad-"

"It's not your fault. I shouldn't have sat you in my seat."

"Okay... was that your boss?"

"Yeah." They turned down a hallway and Matthew noted that the noise was quieting down as they were going away from everyone. "Usually for teens, we won't put in the teddy room, but you're a special case."

"Okay-"

"Jesus, can you say anything aside from 'Okay'?"

"..."

Máximo sighed and soon they were in front of a door. It had something written on it, but Matthew couldn't read it. "This is the Teddy room. Just wait in there okay?"

"..." Matthew didn't say it as he just stood there.

"Well, there are toys, a TV, some books. Entertain yourself for a while-" Máximo opened the door and there was already someone else in there. A kid- a boy with silvery hair. Matthew couldn't see him all that well aside from that. Máximo pushed Matthew into the room and shut the door behind him just as quickly. The room was quiet, aside from the boy that was doing something to a book.

Matthew smiled at the boy and sat down. "Hello there, I'm Matthew." He introduced himself. This boy couldn't be older than Peter.

"... Emil." The boy greeted coldly and emotionlessly. There was a few moments of silence between the two of them. Matthew watched as Emil seemed to be adding color to the picture in front of him. "You're a little old to be in the Teddy room, don't you think?" Emil finally broke the silence.

"Máximo says I'm a special case."

"Huh."

"Why are you in the Teddy room?"

"Big brother couldn't find a sitter, so here I am."

"Oh... what a sitter?"

"A babysitter?"

Matthew tilted his head in question and Emil looked at him with a raised eyebrow. Matthew was close enough to see that Emil's eyes seemed to be purple as well. "Okay, I think I see what Máximo means." Emil snapped the book shut and put it up on a shelf with other books. Emil rifled through the books clearly he was looking for something to hold his interest. "... Do you want to color with me?"

"Color?"

"Yeah. Here-" He slapped a book down on the ground and encouraged Matthew over. Matthew did so and Emil pulled out a baggy from a bag that Matthew could only assume was his. This baggy had weird things in them, they were all of a different color and when he opened them they had a strange yet strong smell that Matthew didn't like but he didn't dislike it either. "Take a crayon."

Matthew did so.

"And you color, but you want to try and stay in the lines..."

The air was tense in Ivan's Braginsky's office as Máximo stood at attention in front of his boss's desk. Ivan wasn't impressed with Máximo's story. "So, let me get this straight, Máximo. You found this kid naked on the beach, he couldn't walk, he has no concept of basic things and clearly shows some sort of mental disability and you *didn't* call CPS?" Ivan Braginsky put his hands on his desk. A dangerous aura radiating off of him.

"Si..."

"Idiot."

"Sorry, sir. It was late and I just wanted to make sure he safe above anything else."

"What do you know?"

"He has brothers in town. I think his dad had to keep him locked in a closet or something like that because he knows...nothing! I had to explain basic things to him, sir." Ivan hummed in question as Máximo explained this all to him.

"Can he read or write?"

"Negative. He doesn't even know how to hold a fork."

"Did he give you a description of his brothers?"

"Yes, here." Máximo dug into his pockets and pulled out his note pad.

"Good, at least you did that right. Now, we'll hand him over to Dr. Bock when he gets here. Give him an evaluation at that then hand him over to CPS-"

"Sir-"

"Hm?"

Máximo tapped his fingers against his thighs for a moment before he spoke "If it's all the same to you. I'd like to keep Matthew in my custody. He's not all there and I feel I can help him." He's been thinking about that all day. He knows the horror stories of foster homes and Matthew needs full attention, not to have that attention shared amongst other kids. Ivan's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Why?"

"He needs full attention to heal from his abuse, a foster home won't help him, but I can."

"Máximo," Ivan sighed and shook his head in disapproval, not a good sign. "I've known you for years. You have a temper, we all know this."

"I can work on it."

"Hm? And what if he asks one question too many? I've seen how you lash out-"

"-Sir."

"This is something you need to bring to CPS, but Máximo, let me say this. If they allow you to foster him, and I see *one* bruise on that boy in the future, I'll take your badge. Understood?"

Máximo gulped. He worked hard to become an officer and he didn't want to stop until he retired. "Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

Even more questions and a familiar face

Chapter Notes

I had to go back and fix Máximo's name in the latest chapters because a friend notified me that the accent was on the wrong side (and yes, it MATTERS). That wasn't fun or easy but for the sake of the story (and my sanity), it had to be done

"See... Spot... run." Emil slowly read out each word for Matthew. Matthew put his finger on each word and read them first in his head then out loud, mimicking Emil. Matthew had to put his face inches from the book to properly read the words before him. Slowly but surely he was starting to understand.

"See. Spot. Run."

"Good." Emil flipped the page. "Spot... runs... fast." He read.

"Spot...runs...fast."

"Yes. You really don't know how to read?"

Matthew shook his head and Emil huffed in annoyance but still flipped the page showing an excited Spot rushing down a hill. "Look at Spot go." he read off of the page.

Matthew didn't get a chance to read as the door opened and a man poked his head into the room. "Hello." The man smiled before he walked in and came up to Matthew. Matthew didn't get a good look at the guy's face until he came up close and crouched down so they were eye level. This man had shiny blonde hair that was a shade or two darker than Matthew's own hair. His eyes were a nice pleasant shade of blue. His facial expression was soft and inviting he didn't seem so angry, like almost everyone else Matthew had run into. "You must be Matthew?"

"Yes, sir!" Matthew smiled.

"I'm Eduard Bock." He brought his hand out for Matthew to take. Matthew looked at Emil for a moment and then back at Eduard. Matthew slowly took Eduard's hand into his own which Eduard shook. That's how they greet, right? "I'm the therapist-"

Emil snorted and opened a bigger book to read for himself. "That's not what big brother says."

"You hush, Emil." Eduard hissed in annoyance. "I have a doctorate."

"Yeah but you got this job because you have connections-"

"Shush. Emil. Shush." Eduard hushed the child quickly. "Don't embarrass me. Come on, Matthew." Eduard helped Matthew up to his feet and started to lead him away from Emil and away from the Teddy room. "I just need to ask you a few questions."

"Okay." Matthew followed along and they walked out of the teddy room and down the hallway past just a few doors. Eduard opened a door with writing on the glass. Matthew leaned in and looked at each word.

"D...R..." Matthew read out loud. "E. ...Bock." Matthew narrowed his eyes as he spoke the word out as Emil had taught him.

"Good, but the D.R. is pronounced 'Doctor.'" Eduard opened the door for Matthew. Matthew looked at the D.R. part again and then raised an eyebrow.

"How?" Matthew questioned and walked into the room.

"Ah..." Eduard didn't seem to know how to answer that because he didn't answer it. He just walked in, shut the door behind himself, and walked over to a desk where he sat. There were three different kinds of seats. Two chairs, one looking cozier than the other and the third one having no back as a normal chair would. Obviously, Matthew sat on that one. It moved when he sat.

"Oh?" Matthew kicked his legs and the chair moved with him. "It moves?" He was tempted to start spinning, but Eduard put a hand up.

"Please sit still."

"Sorry." He did as he was told and put his hands in his lap. Still, he did start to kick his legs.

"No need to apologize. Now, I want to ask you a few questions." Eduard pulled out some paper from his desk as well as a pen.

"Okay. What do you need to know?"

"Let's start with your father. What's he like?"

Matthew did frown a little and kicked his feet- his *feet* just yesterday he didn't have feet!- Still, before he got too distracted he answered Eduard to the best of his abilities. "He's my dad. I love him."

"Yes, of course, but what's he *like*?"

"Well... he can be a little controlling." Eduard nodded and wrote something down, Matthew was having difficulty seeing Eduard from so far, but just kept going regardless. "He...doesn't seem to want me to go out on my own and be my own person."

Eduard hummed as he wrote this down as well. "Okay-"

"I mean, I'm not you, nor am I Liam! I don't want to stay put I want to do my own thing. I know He just wants the best for me, but... Sometimes it feels like he just wants the best for himself."

Eduard hummed and started to write. This writing went on for a few seconds before he asked the obvious question. "Who's Liam?"

"Eldest brother."

There was more writing. "Alright. How'd you find your way to the beach? Do you live far from there?"

Matthew sat back and almost fell back because there was no rest for his back. Once he straightened himself out he answered. "I guess you could say we live a little... away from the beach. Not close but not far."

"But you don't live in town?"

"No sir."

"I see so another town over?"

"...Kinda..." Was that a lie? He did live underwater but it was like their own little town.

"Okay." Eduard took the things off of his face and rubbed his eyes with one hand. "Let's get away from there for a moment. I'm going to ask you a very serious question, alright?"

"Ookay." Matthew nodded as he wondered what Eduard meant by a 'very serious question.'
"Ask away." he smiled.

"Does your dad touch you?" Eduard practically whispered the question as he put his glasses back on his face.

"..." Matthew racked his brain. What did Eduard mean by that? and Why did it seem to be an uncomfortable question to ask? Touch? Like hugs? Still, Matthew just shrugged and answered as honestly as he could. "My father was never one for touching. Maybe to get his point across he might grab me or my brothers to stop us from swi- I mean rushing off. He might put his hands on our shoulders as a way to silence us."

Eduard wrote that down. "Do you ever feel uncomfortable around your dad?"

"Why would I? He's my dad." Matthew said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Eduard nodded rather satisfied with that, Matthew being unaware if he was confused or not.

"Okay. Does your father hit you or your bothers?"

Matthew blinked. "I mean..." He thought about it for a moment. He knew he was making a face as a memory popped up in his head so he decided to just tell it against his better judgment. "I've seen him harshly grab my twin a couple of times, but Alfred is so *stubborn* and wouldn't listen, dad had gotten fed up and might have smacked him against

he back of the head." Matthew bit his lip as he thought about it. This was a recent memory as well not when they were just little guppies. Alfred *exploded* with anger and ran off for a month he only came back because Liam had dragged him back by the ear. *'I wonder if dad hit him again and that's why he decided to become human...'*

"Has he ever hit *you*?" Eduard questioned as he wrote down what Matthew had said.

"Me? Oh no. When dad tells me to stop I know to listen."

"Alright, now...Máximo tells me you don't have a basic concept on things, and judging by the fact that I witnessed Emil teaching you to read I'm going to have to say that's true. Why wouldn't your father teach you these things? Like how to read?"

"Why would he? We don't need to know that stuff." Matthew hoped that wasn't the wrong thing to say. He couldn't see Eduard's face so he had no clue if it was or wasn't.

"I see..." Eduard sighed as he seemed to be reading over what he had written. "I think that's enough questions for now." Eduard decided as he put the things back on his face. "Well, That is unless you have a question for me?"

"Just one. What are those things? That you just put on your face?"

Eduard seemed to blink for a moment as he was processing what was just asking. "My glasses? I need them to see."

"You mean not everyone can see?" Matthew couldn't believe it. Was that why he was having issues? Was he one of those humans who *couldn't see*? How do they survive?- well with glasses, obviously.

Eduard laughed. "Of course not. I'm far-sighted. Meaning I can see things from a distance but stuff up close are blurry... Matthew? Can you see?"

Matthew frowned. "I can see... but it's all blurry."

"How come you didn't bring this up to Máximo?"

"It didn't seem important." Matthew simply shrugged and Eduard sighed.

"Well, it is, but no matter I'll bring it up to your social worker- ah, speaking of which." Right on cue, the door to Eduard's room opened and a woman with blonde hair came in. She seemed to be of average height but Matthew didn't need glasses to see that she clearly had a pretty big bust on her chest that almost bounced with every move she made. "Iryna. A pleasure to see you again." Eduard seemed to blush, something Matthew again could see without glasses.

"Eduard." Iryna smiled as she came over a little closer. She wore a nice black skirt that showed her legs off but still stopped just below the knee. She also wore a white ruffled top that just showed off her breast even more (if possible).

"How'd I know Ivan would call you?" Eduard laughed a little but stood up. "I'm going to get a coffee, Matthew why don't you talk to Iryna for a while?" Eduard said before he left the room leaving Matthew alone with this new person. He was meeting a lot of people today it seemed.

And then it was him and this lady. Matthew sat there rather awkwardly as the lady, Iryna, just watched him before smiling. She wasn't as demanding as Emma. So that was nice. "...You know Ivan?" Iryna asked after a moment more of silence. Matthew shook his head. "Big guy? Maximo's boss?-" She hid her mouth by her hand like she didn't want anyone else to know, despite it was just the two of them. "A bit of a big nose?"

"Oh. Mr. Braginsky?" Matthew questioned.

"Yes! He's my younger brother."

"Oh, so you two work together?"

"...Kinda, but not really. Tell me, Matthew-" She pulled out a paper and started to write. I was told you had siblings could you tell me about them?"

Matthew felt like he was talking in circles as Iryna questioned him almost the exact same way as Eduard had. Only her questioning sounded and felt... uncomfortably personal to the point that at times Matthew had a hard time lying. "Has your father locked you in a dark room? You can't see? Does he feed you regularly? What do you eat? How many siblings do you have? What are their names? Do you have a mother?"

That last question of the bunch Matthew just couldn't answer. As far as he knew he *didn't* have a mother. Just their father raised all of them by himself. Eventually, Iryna stopped her questions and put some papers away. She then pulled something out of her briefcase. It was a book. "I... talked to Emil before coming in here. I want you to try and read this book. Okay?"

"Alright." He tried to read the title before him.

"Thank you, Matthew. You did a good job." She smiled at him. "I need to go now, but don't worry. I'll visit you tomorrow at Maximo's house- oh, and Matthew?" She stopped at the doorway.

"Yes, miss?"

"You can tell me anything. Alright? I'm here to help you find your family, we all are."

"Okay, thank you." Matthew smiled. He was so happy that so many people were at least trying to help him find his brothers, as troublesome as Peter and Alfred are.

"You're going to need to get his eyes checked. He's going to need a lot of attention, Máxi." Iryna sighed as she handed some paperwork to Máximo.

Máximo, Eduard, Iryna were all in Ivan's office. Ivan watching over this as a witness of sorts. Máximo took the paperwork and read over.

"Now, he can't read. I've given him a book and I want you to help him read and write."

"Alright, I figured as much."

Eduard spoke next. "Emil was trying to help him learn to read when I came in. Granted it was *'See Spot Run.'* Regardless, Máximo. I think it won't actually be hard teaching Matthew. He figured out how to read my door pretty quickly."

"He's a fast learner. I've seen it myself this morning." Máximo flicked through the paperwork with his thumb. "I'm sure once he gets the basic's he'll take off. I just can't wrap my head around why his dad would do this."

"I talked to him, he says his father didn't keep him locked up in any sort of room-" Iryna spoke but was cut off by Eduard.

"-Yes, but he told me his father has struck his brother quite a couple of times. He also said he doesn't 'need to know that stuff' in regard to reading and also that he knows to be quiet and listen to his father. Best guess? Dad doesn't want disobedience and goes to extreme levels to prevent it."

"If he doesn't learn to read or write then he won't make it in the real world," Ivan muttered as he thought about it. "It's a classic tactic really. They can't escape if they don't have the means to do so. I bet that kid would have been hit by a car by now if Máximo hadn't have picked him up on the beach."

"He was naked too... but that doesn't explain why he couldn't walk." Máximo thought about it.

"I don't know, but I don't like it. Still, I have the sketch artists working on pictures of his brothers and maybe we can more answers once they're found." Ivan hummed and stood up. "Good job, everyone. Máximo?"

"Sir?"

"You're free to leave early today and take tomorrow off as well. Get the kid to an eye doctor and for God's sake get him some proper clothes." Ivan stood up from his desk. "Still, I want that kid here when you return. We'll have him keep talking to Dr. Bock and Iryna to try and get more information out of him *and* to help him get up to speed on his learning if possible, understood?"

"Yes, sir." Máximo turned and left, honestly a little relieved that he only had to work a half-day today.

The moment the door snapped shut behind him Ivan turned his focus on Eduard and Iryna. "Keep an eye on Matthew. If anything seems out of place, anything at all, you report it to me, understood?" He ordered and both of the nodded. "Good."

Gilbert let out a happy whistle as he opened the front door for little Feliciano and Ludwig to walk out. The playdate was coming to a close and now they were meeting Eliza and Rodrich at the store. Gilbert made a mental note to ask Eliza just why Feliciano was wearing a dress. The boy jumped down happily from the front step and smiled at Gilbert. Gilbert smiled back at Feliciano. Ludwig came out moments later.

The dress Feliciano was wearing in question was a lovely shade of green and poofed around him. The issue with the dress was that Feliciano now looked like a girl. Gilbert honestly didn't care about any of that, but according to Ludwig a couple of kids in their class had made fun of him for the dress, but it didn't seem that Feliciano cared.

"Mr. Beilschmidt?" Came to a call just across the lawn. Gilbert looked over at his neighbor, Kiku Honda. Kiku and Gilbert were honestly the same age, Kiku being just two months older. Still, Kiku acted and dressed like an elderly man. He had a garden, envy of all. He had vegetables, fruits, flowers, all in full beautiful bloom that he would then sell at the farmers market for a pretty penny. And for good reason! His stuff was the best.

Kiku took great care of his garden. He wasn't part of the apartment complex but rather right next door in his own home. The garden was actually Kiku's own backyard. It was a weird layout with Gilbert's front door being beside Kiku's backyard.

Once or twice Kiku had offered to babysit Ludwig when Gilbert needed a break which was honestly nice of him.

"Hello, Kiku!" Feliciano smiled at the Japanese man.

"*Konichiwa*, Feliciano-San, Ludwig-San." Kiku gave just the faintest smile at Feliciano and Ludwig before facing Gilbert. Gilbert expected a smile, maybe a greeting, what Gilbert didn't expect from the usually quiet man was smack up top the head from a broomstick.

"Ow!" Gilbert grabbed the top of his head and groaned out in pain. "Un-awesome!" Was all Gilbert could say as the pain started to radiate from the top of his head. The kids laughed because of course, they did. Kids were assholes.

"Keep your sticky fingers out of my garden! I work too hard for you to just up and take my flowers-"

"Ow! Stop that!" Gilbert hissed as he got another wack from Mr. broomstick. "I'm sorry! I was just... trying to impress someone." Gilbert admitted and flinched as he thought Kiku was going for yet *another* hit. Thankfully, Kiku didn't and he brought the broom down to his side.

"Next time ask; don't just take." Kiku went back to his emotionless façade and then started to prune his hibiscus bush.

"Can I have a flower?" Feliciano asked almost immediately afterward.

It seemed to prove his point Kiku cut a flower off of the bush and put it in Feliciano's hair. "Of course." Feliciano giggled and now looked even more like a girl with the dress and

flower.

"Yesh. I'm sorry, Kiku." Gilbert grumbled. "How'd you know I took them in the first place?"

"I have eyes everywhere, Mr. Beilschmidt." Kiku simply said as he went back to pruning. Gilbert raised an eyebrow at that, but then he saw Kiku's blinds move from his little one story house behind him. Gilbert couldn't see a body, but he *knew* he saw two bright blue eyes looking at him quizzically.

"Heh." Gilbert chuckled. "I see. Tell your little friend I said 'hi' *ja*?" Gilbert grinned. He knew he hit Kiku where it hurt because Kiku turned a sudden shade of red. "See you, Kiku." Gilbert then quickly rounded the children up and left before Mr. Broomstick could hit him for the third time that day. Kiku muttered something in Japanese before turning around to go back into his house.

"That wasn't nice, *Bruder*," Ludwig said as he grabbed Gilbert's hand. Damn this kid for being so honest.

Gilbert just chuckled. "Neither was hitting me with a broom."

Ludwig seemed like he wanted to protest but couldn't find the right words so he stayed silent on the subject. Gilbert's other hand was taken as Feliciano took it and skipped along happily. Yes, skipped. Gilbert couldn't stay quiet. "Hey, Feli? Aren't you a little worried that someone will see you as a girl?"

"I don't care. It makes Mrs. Elizaveta happy to see me in a dress." Feliciano smiled.

"I think he looks cute." Ludwig pipped up suddenly. His face was red and it was clear that just saying that took a lot of courage. Feliciano blushed in return.

"I didn't realize you were into traps," Gilbert said without thinking. He immediately regretted it.

"T...Traps?" Gilbert could see the wheels in Ludwig's head as he was trying to figure it all out.

"Nothing! Forget I said anything! let's just... get to the store in peace, *Ja*?" It was Gilbert's turn to blush when he silenced his little brother. Feliciano and Ludwig looked at each other in confusion before they just shrugged it off and complied with Gilbert. So, Gilbert piled the two children in his car and quickly took off. Both kids were quiet during the car ride to the store.

It didn't take long for Gilbert to get to the store as it was only a five-minute drive. So, he parked (he got a good parking spot to boot!) and looked at his phone. He had a new message from Eliza.

We're going to be a smidge late, but also I'm like 95% sure Lovino is going to try and ambush us at the store. Keep Feliciano away please; It's going to be loud I can feel it.

Gilbert tossed a look back at the kids. Neither of them noticed him or his message, so he sent a quick reply back.

What happened?

He didn't have to wait long for a reply. Maybe ten or so seconds. This told Gilbert that she was either furious or just excited.

I don't know. Everything sets him off nowadays. It just PROVES my point that he has too short of a temper to raise a child. So, I want him to yell at us in public. Witnesses.

Gilbert frowned.

Eliza, I don't think that's a good idea. I know you want to keep Feli- Gilbert sighed as he looked at what he had written. He made a face and quickly erased it. He wasn't going to get involved. Nobody was dragging him down them. So he just kept his mouth shut. Still, even though he wasn't getting involved, he wasn't going to let Feliciano be submitted to more shouting and screaming, so he was going to do the right thing and take Feliciano inside the store with him and Ludwig.

Kiku sighed softly as he shut the door to his home. He then leaned against the door for good measure. He trusted Gilbert enough not to follow him. He then looked at his guest who was standing by the window and 'hmphe'd' in annoyance. "Are you just trying to get caught, Alfred-san!?" Kiku asked after he peeled himself off of the door.

"No, dude. I just heard you yelling and just thought I'd lookout. I didn't know he saw me!" Alfred brought his hands up in defense as Kiku tightened his grip on his trusty broomstick. Alfred has already met Mr. Broomstick and doesn't wish to see him any time soon.

Kiku knew about Alfred and what he was. In fact: Kiku knew about this for *years* now.

The two of them first met when Kiku was out fishing on his boat for his dinner one evening. Alfred thought it'd be funny to mess with Kiku and just almost make the boat tip, but not fully tip. Well, that didn't turn out too well when Alfred, not paying attention, had gotten caught in Kiku's net. Call it karma or whatnot. Still, Kiku just couldn't believe it when he brought his net out of the water and was face to face with an actual Merman. A very chatty Merman at that.

It seemed that since Alfred saw that he was caught he started to blab and talk non-stop to Kiku. Saying things about his father, his brothers, and blah, blah, blah. Still, it had to be enduring in some form or another because Kiku just listened to every word that was said, no matter how meaningless, and that turned to be helpful. When Kiku learned that the Mer-creatures down below actually helped the sea life to the best of their abilities he decided there and then that he'd be a horrible person if he captured this creature. So, he let Alfred go.

But then Kiku couldn't stay away, and it seemed neither could Alfred because soon they would meet one another daily and talk. Not near the shore, that was too risky, but out in the ocean while Kiku was in his boat. He brought Alfred treats and toy's which the merman just

loved to bits. This went on for two years at max. The two would meet and talk. Kiku loved every moment of it. This was his secret that he didn't have to share with the world and he loved that almost as much as he was starting to grow fond of Alfred.

Then four days ago Alfred never showed and Kiku feared the worst, but fate was funny it seemed. As when he was bringing his boat to shore who was there to greet him on the shore but Alfred. Kiku almost couldn't believe what he was seeing. Granted, Alfred wasn't standing, but it was him. Those eyes were proof. He was also naked as the day he was born. Nope, Kiku wouldn't allow it. He knew right then that he was going to help and understand what happened.

He was helping, but he just didn't understand.

At least Alfred was dressed now. Alfred was a quick learner he learned how to walk within hours. Still, now came the trouble of keeping Alfred in place. "Just be careful!" Kiku huffed just slightly. "I know you're curious and I know you probably want to explore, but all in due time. I promise we need to get you reading first and foremost."

"I know but I can't see." Alfred practically whined. Yeah, it turned out that Alfred couldn't see properly either. That was shocking and something Kiku knew from day one. It was obvious by his constant squinting.

"I know, and that will be the first thing we do for you, but I can't take you to a person that's going to ask you to read letters, and you not know what those letters are." Kiku pointed out plainly as he walked up to Alfred. "You just need to keep your face close to the page. Okay?"

Alfred deflated just slightly. "Yeah, I know you're looking out for me. I can't thank you enough, really, I can't."

"Alfred-san, I must ask. Why did you become human?" Kiku had asked this question a couple of times and Alfred usually deflected it.

It seemed today was no different as he smiled. "I told you, dude, I just wanted to see how the other side lives!" It was a bald-faced lie, a well crafted one, still, Alfred had a giveaway when he lied and Kiku just sighed as he watched the giveaway.

"Of course, you'll tell me when you're ready." Kiku sighed with a headshake. "Come now, I'll make you some Ramen and help you with reading."

"Awesome! I love your ramen!"

"Are you mad at me?"

The question Matthew asked came out of nowhere and threw Máximo off in such a way that he almost dropped the cereal box he was holding.

Immediately after he had gotten off work Máximo took Matthew to the store to get some clothes and food. Tomorrow they'd go to the eye doctor as the man was busy today.

Hell, Máximo was still in uniform. "What?" He asked after a few seconds. He sounded baffled.

"Are you mad at me?" Matthew asked again. His look was innocent if not slightly hurt.

"No, why would I be mad?"

"Because you hadn't really spoken to me since we left the station... I thought I had upset you in some way or form..."

Well, the good thing was that Matthew was picking up on cues and words. Still, he was getting a little twisted. "I'm not mad, Mattie. I've just been thinking is all... Hey, why don't you go over and look at some of those shirts? Pick out one or two you like?" Máximo pointed Matthew towards the direction of the shirts in question as they were leaving the aisle. "I'll be right here. Okay?"

"Okay..." Matthew went off in that direction in question.

Shirts... he knew what they were and how they worked. He remembered some swimmer had left his shirt behind once and Matthew put it on. It was a little big and it weighed him down and obviously, he was wearing a shirt right now. Still, there were so many he didn't know what he was looking for exactly. He didn't know shirts had so many designs on them. Some were in the shape of leaves, and some had writing on them. Matthew squinted his eyes as he tried to read the writing but he couldn't make it out.

"Hey, Máximo?-" Matthew turned his head around to where Máximo said he'd be, but he wasn't there. The cart was there, Matthew recognized some of the stuff in it as theirs but no Máximo. Matthew could hear, what sounded like, yelling coming from the front of the store. But he couldn't make out what was being said and thought 'maybe it was a human thing?'

"Máximo?" Matthew walked up to the cart and looked around. His friend wasn't anywhere in sight.

"Daddy? Where are you going?" Matthew held on to his father's hand for dear life as his father was starting to swim off into unknown waters. Towards Marius's waters. Out of reflex, Alfred grabbed on to Matthew's hand just as well. They were still close enough towards the ship, Matthew could see it from where he was, but dad was leaving! Dad never leaves.

*"Don't worry about me boys. I'm going to go out of sight. Okay? Just stay here and don't move. I mean it." Their dad told them sternly as he put a hand on both of their shoulders. "It's very important that I do this, but it's even more important that you stay put until I come back. You both **are** brave aren't you?"*

Matthew frowned and held on to Alfred's arm for dear life. Alfred puffed his chest up bravely. "Of course!" Alfred answered for the two of them. "I'm the bravest merman in the whole sea!"

"Good. Now, stay put."

"Stay put." Matthew hummed to himself and leaned against it the shopping cart. Matthew realized a while ago that humans had a thing for objects that move easily. He just accepted it. The yelling off in the distance wasn't stopping. It seemed that a third party had joined in. Matthew frowned and wondered if he should move from his spot. Still, he followed what his father had told him and he stayed put.

He grew bored and looked at the shirt he had grabbed. He should try and read so before long that's what he was trying to do. "B...b.." He recognized the letter 'B' and he saw two 'o's and a 'k'. "B..boak?" He finally spat out and tilted his head in confusion. "Bôok?"

"Book- I knew you weren't a- I mean- ah." Came a voice from behind. Matthew turned and at first didn't see anyone until he looked down and saw a little blonde boy. For a split second, he thought he was looking at Peter, but he quickly realized he wasn't. Peter's eyes weren't as blue as this kid's and Peter's hair was a darker shade of blonde. The kid looked uncomfortable as he fidgeted awkwardly in his spot. He looked back behind him before focusing back on Matthew. "It says 'the book was better'- A-also! I appear to be lost!" He stumbled over his words as his face turned red.

"Oh no..." Matthew leaned down so they were eye level. He instantly felt bad for this child.

"Y-yes! I can't find my brother! C-Can you help me?" This child looked awkward as he spoke, his face still the same shade of red and his eyes wide and panicked. This boy was scared and Matthew felt his heartstrings twinge.

"You poor thing. I know how you're feeling. I'm missing my brothers as well." Matthew frowned. He knew to stay put and wait for Máximo, but this was just a child. Clearly, this one wasn't taught the 'stay-put' rule. "Of course I will." Matthew grabbed the boy's hand. Still, as naïve as Matthew may be at times. He wasn't stupid. He watched as the boy started to freak. His face turned red and he was constantly looking over at an aisle just behind them. Had Matthew done something wrong to spook the boy?

"Ludwig?"

Matthew knew that voice.

Around the corner of the aisle came Gilbert a cart filled with water jugs. "Gilbert?" Matthew felt his eyes widened. He honestly thought he'd never see Gilbert again, but there he was less than five feet away. Matthew looked at Gilbert. Gilbert looked at Matthew and Matthew looked at Gilbert.

"Holy- birdie!" Gilbert ran up excitedly. "I thought- I- I didn't recognize you outside of the water!" Gilbert grinned as it seemed he didn't know what to do with his hands. As at first Gilbert went for a hug but paused, and then tried a handshake, but bailed on that as well.

"Gilbert! I'm so sorry I haven't been able to see you. I've been... ba-busy." Matthew only half lied and he hoped Gilbert didn't pick up on it.

He didn't.

"Oh, that's good! I thought maybe..." Gilbert laughed and changed directions in which his sentence was going fairly quickly. "I mean, I knew you couldn't be mad at the awesome me!" He laughed a very nervous laugh and Matthew couldn't help but giggle at Gilbert as he felt his face start to blush. He missed Gilbert's humor.

"Yes, well, I was going to help this little boy find his brother." Matthew was ashamed that he didn't connect the dots, or even read the air. The moment he pointed at the boy- 'Ludwig' he was going to find out- Ludwig looked like he wanted to vanish.

"I'm his brother." Gilbert put a hand on his hip and looked down at Ludwig, eyebrow raised.

"Oh, you two look so different! Then again... if you would have put me next to my sister Lillie you never would guess we were siblings..." Matthew muttered to himself.

"Ludwig, what are you doing?" Gilbert sighed and got down on one knee so they were face to face. Matthew only watched as Ludwig whispered something into Gilbert's ear in response. Matthew noted how close the two seemed to be. How calm Gilbert was and how Ludwig was more than happy to fess up any wrong doing he might have been planning. Gilbert just sighed again. A long sigh that Matthew knew all too well.

"Alright, Feli. C'mon now." Gilbert stood back up and in a more commanding tone beckoned another child out from behind an aisle. A girl (Matthew thought) came out, head down, looking guilty. Gilbert said nothing as the little girl stood next to Ludwig rather shamefully.

"Is this one also one of your siblings?" Matthew asked, even though he knew Gilbert said that he only had one sibling. Still, Gilbert didn't remind him and just answered honestly.

"Feli? Nah, I'm just babysitting him. And sorry about this whole ordeal. I guess these two decided to try and use an old pick-up line." Gilbert blushed. "Kids, right?"

Matthew didn't really know what Gilbert meant by that, but he smiled nonetheless. "So, Birdie... if I can be so bold-" It seemed that Gilbert was going to ask something but was cut off, not by Matthew, or the children, but by the yell that erupted from the front of the store. This one Matthew, and the entire store, heard loud and clear as a man screamed out-

"HOW DARE YOU INSINUATE THAT I WOULD HURT MY BROTHER!"

Matthew blinked in shock, he had no idea that humans could yell that loud. "Wow, whoever that is sounds upset-" Matthew spoke aloud as he debated going up front to see what the big fight was about. Little Feli caught Matthew's eye just moments after. The girl (?) suddenly went rushing past Gilbert and Ludwig. The child was rushing towards the front of the store where the fight was taking place.

"Ah! Feli, wait!" Gilbert cried after the running child and before Matthew knew it Ludwig and Gilbert both retreated after Feli.

Oh, how Matthew wanted to stay put like his father had taught him all those moons ago, but he couldn't. Gilbert could be running into trouble! So, Matthew, against his better judgment, followed the three of them. A rather large crowd was formed around whoever was shouting.

Feli pushed past several people without a problem, as did Ludwig, but because Matthew and Gilbert were much bigger than the smaller children- and Matthew could see well, it was a lot harder. He stepped on several people's toes and apologized to everyone whom he bumped.

Eventually, he made it to the front and he found out where Máximo went as the larger man was currently holding a woman back. This woman was clearly trying to harm a man. A man who looked an awful lot like Feli (It was actually at this moment did Matthew notice that both had curls, Feli had a curl on the right, while the other had a curl on the right.). Her fists were balled and she kicked and wiggled violently against Máximo, smacking him in the face more than once. He wasn't letting up though, but it did seem like he was getting impatient.

The man whom she was trying to attack, was also being held back, by another man. His skin was tan, but lighter than Maximo, his eyes were almost the same green color as Matthew's fathers and his hair color was also lighter than the other man. This man was taller than the other man with the curl and was using his height to his advantage as he kept his arms under the others stopping him from lunging. "Easy, Lovino! This isn't worth jail time over!" The other man hissed, his accent almost similar to Maximo's.

There was a fourth man just standing back he was unfortunately too far for Matthew to make out perfectly, but from what Matthew could see. He was tall, pale, skinny, and had black or brown hair. He wasn't engaging in the fight, but he wasn't out of it was it was clear that he was just waiting for something to happen.

"Shut it, Antonio!" Lovino barked in response.

Sniffing is what caught Matthew's ear next. It wasn't the woman or the three men, but rather little Feli who was standing next to Matthew.

Honestly, Matthew felt this on a level. He wasn't the smartest in human culture but he just knew that this Lovino was Feli's brother (he was too young to be a father) and maybe the woman might be his mother? They did look a little alike, then again Matthew still couldn't see. Still, Matthew knew how stressful watching family fights can be. Again, Alfred is stubborn and his father is hard-headed.

"*Primo!* Control her!" Antonio suddenly yelled to Máximo of all people.

"I'm *trying!* I don't see you helping!" Máximo snapped.

"I *am!*"

Feli started to cry a little louder and Matthew huffed in annoyance, not at Feli, they were innocent, but at the people fighting. Gilbert, was quicker than Matthew ever dreamed to be as he suddenly grabbed Feli and started to drag them away from the fight, all while grumbling under his breath. Gilbert, forgetting his groceries for now, was making a bee-line for the exit. Like Matthew, it was painstakingly clear that Gilbert wasn't mad at Feli, but rather the fighting as he shot the crazy part a well-placed glare before leaving.

Matthew, unnoticed by Máximo, left right after Gilbert. Gilbert had Ludwig's hand in one hand and Feli's in the other.

"Gil!" Matthew called after the retreating form- and then slipped and fell on the ground. "Ouch!" Matthew hissed in pain and he sat up slowly looking at his knee. It was bleeding. Matthew only blinked before hissing at the immense amount of pain that started to come.

Ludwig and Feli both raced up before Gilbert could. "Are you okay?" Gilbert was the one to ask, but Feli and Ludwig were the ones to help Matthew to his feet.

"Yeah, that just hurt. A lot." Matthew cringed in pain.

"C'mon, I think I have some band-aids in the car." Gilbert took Matthew by the arm and together they went to his car. Matthew smiled at this. He really did miss Gilbert. A lot more than he realized.

A dinner date!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A low hiss of pain left Matthew's mouth as Gilbert carefully placed a rather large band-aid on his skinned knee. "There we go." Gilbert smiled as he placed the small box of band-aids back into the backseat of his car. Matthew looked at the box for a moment before looking back at Gilbert. Matthew was honestly surprised as he could see

"Thank you." Matthew smiled cutely at Gilbert. That was when Feliciano (Gilbert told him that Feliciano was in fact a boy that liked dresses) came up to Matthew excitedly and suddenly kissed the top of the band-aid with a loud and over the top '*Mwah!*' leaving his mouth. Matthew didn't know what to say so he decided not to say anything in the end. Matthew then looked back at Gilbert, all four of them hanging around the outside of his car. Matthew was rather impressed by the band-aid stopping the bleeding and he wanted to pull the band-aid back, but he resisted that urge. Something told him it wouldn't go over well.

"So, Birdie, what exactly are you wearing?" Gilbert laughed suddenly as he gestured to Matthew's outfit. It was still the same outfit he had put on earlier. So it was all Maximo's clothing that hung loosely off of his body like an extra skin. Matthew was just happy for the belt that was currently holding his pants up. "I mean, I'm no fashionista but..." He trailed off before he could finish his sentence as he shook his head.

"It's not mine. I don't own clothing, yet." Matthew told the truth as he pulled on the shirt. "It's all Máximo's clothing."

"Y...You don't *own* clothing?" Gilbert asked in a bit of shock at the statement that was just said to him. Matthew watched as Gilbert's face twisted in confusion as it was clear he was trying to understand it. "I-Uh-*what?*"

"Oh! I know! I learned about this from Mr. Rodrich!" Feliciano raised his hand suddenly and Matthew felt his smile slip as his blood ran cold.

The child *knew*? and he learned it from someone?! Who? How? Then again between him, Peter, and Alfred they clearly didn't keep it locked up well-

"He's a nudist!" Feliciano clapped his hands excitedly like he got it all figured out.

"A-" Matthew tried to speak up but was cut off by little Ludwig.

"That does make sense..." Ludwig sat on the trunk of the car, right next to Matthew. He then looked Matthew up and down in thought. "Well, he *was* a nudist-"

"Wait-wait. How do you two know about nudists- no- why is *Rodrich* telling you about nudists?!" And just like that the conversation shifted away from Matthew, and he was rather thankful for that, it felt like a weight was lifted off of his shoulders for the time being and he

just sat back and listened to Feliciano explain away about the strange naked boy he had seen the other day- wait a minute...

"-He was with our neighbor! and Rodrich said that the kid was probably a nudist-"

"Was he blonde?" Matthew jumped from the trunk quickly as he focused on Feliciano. Feliciano put his hand to his chin in thought as he opened his eyes to look at the sky.

"Oh yeah, the neighbor is blonde-"

"No, Feli, the kid. Was he blonde?" Matthew felt his heart thud away.

"Oh... I didn't get a good look as Mr. Rodrich pulled me away."

Matthew felt a little deflated at that, but that was something...

"Hey, to change the subject- when you say 'Máximo' You don't mean Máximo Machado do you?" Gilbert suddenly asked Matthew snapping him out of his current thoughts.

"Máximo? Oh, he's-"

"-There you are!" Maximo's voice soared through the parking lot as he stormed his way over to them.

"-Right there!" Matthew smiled, but Gilbert was not smiling, in fact he was scowling. Had Matthew made him upset?

"What the hell were you thinking walking out of the store like that?! Do you know the heart-attack you just gave me?" Máximo snapped as he approached the car.

"Sorry, I was talking with Gilbert!" Matthew explained as he pointed at Gilbert. Who frowned even deeper, if that was possible.

Máximo blinked a little, now intrigued (but still looking angry). He turned and looked Gilbert up and down. "Do you know him?" Matthew didn't know if Máximo was asking him or Gilbert that question.

It was Gilbert who answered first. "What's it to you?"

That didn't exactly sound 'friendly'. Matthew was 100% sure that was defensive behavior and Gilbert crossing his arms as he sneered didn't help.

"Burder." Ludwig pulled on Gilbert's shirt sleeve. Not in an attention-seeking way but rather a 'be careful, please.' way. A warning of sorts. One that Matthew knew personally, as usual, he was the one to give these little signals to Alfred on more than one occasion.

So obviously Matthew should speak to get Máximo to focus away from Gilbert before things got too loud. "Yes, we do know each other. He used to talk to me, Máximo."

"Wait-wait-wait." Máximo turned back to Matthew. "I'm confused... I know you told Iryna you weren't locked up, as we thought, but you were actually allowed to communicate with people?"

"Whoa-whoa, back up!" Gilbert gasped. "Máxi, what do you mean by all that?" Matthew decided the best course of action was to just keep his mouth shut so not to confuse things any more. How he wished he could tell the two of them the truth, but he knew they wouldn't believe him.

Máximo frowned as he put a fist on his hip and the other to his chin. "It's kind of really complicated... but you might be able to help us."

Gilbert made a face and crossed his arms. "I don't know about an interrogation, Máxi. I don't have a fond memory of police stations." Gilbert looked up at the sky. "Plus, I have to work the rest of this week. This is my only day off."

"...How about dinner?"

Now Gilbert really made a face of disgust. "...Are you asking me out-"

"Heavens no! Get your head out of your ass, Beilschmidt. A civil dinner tonight between the... five of us-"

"Four. Feli isn't with me tonight." Gilbert sighed.

"Fine, the four of us. I won't pry, I just need questions answered."

"...Fine." Gilbert gave up rather easily, the funny thing was that he looked directly at Matthew before giving in. "My apartment. At six. I'm making wurst and potatoes."

"That's fine."

"Oh, I never had Wurst- what's that?" Matthew instantly asked and Gilbert blinked before coughing a little.

"Sausage."

Matthew blinked innocently before looking at Máximo for answers. Máximo just sighed. "I'll explain later, c'mon." With an urge forward Matthew walked with Máximo back towards the store, but not before giving Gilbert one last look over his shoulder.

"See you tonight, Gil!" Matthew called back as he waved goodbye.

"So, how *do* you know Gilbert Beilschmidt?" Máximo questioned.

Matthew stepped out of the dressing rooms and showed off the new outfit, apparently, it's a thing for humans to test out clothes to see if they liked them. It was a T-shirt with writing on it that Matthew was slowly trying to make out. He also had on a pair of jeans that fit him a lot

better than Máximo's baggy pants. Matthew looked at himself in the nearby mirror- did he really look like that!?

"Hey-" Máximo snapped his fingers before he appeared in the mirror, in the background, to get Matthew's attention back on him. It worked. "Don't get distracted."

"Sorry, uh, Gilbert and I met a while back. You see I was allowed to swim in the sea, Gilbert was the first to catch me on one of my swimming sprees. We just started talking. That's all- though he did give me flowers last time."

Máximo hummed. "Why didn't you just run away from your father?" It was a question on his mind, of course, he knew the answer. It was never easy, not for an abuse victim being forced into a lifestyle like Matthews. He's seen it, he's seen battered wives run wildly into their abuser's arms, he's seen children cry for their parent despite that parent starving them. So, he saw Matthew's answer coming a mile away.

"Why would I? I love my dad, and besides, I wouldn't have anywhere else to go- aside from Marius that is." Matthew spoke too much. He knew this the moment Marius's name left his mouth,

"Who's Marius?" Máximo questioned with an eyebrow raised almost to the top of his hairline.

"Nobody you should concern yourself with." Matthew left it at that as he walked back into the changing room. "I like this outfit." He changed the subject.

"Alright..." Máximo sighed, Matthew could hear him crossing his arms in frustration and irritation alike. "Well that's four outfits... that should last you for now. Now we move on to shoes, though I'm not sure you can handle-" Matthew was already changed before Máximo finished. So he slammed the door open with all his might at the opportunity, scaring the crap out of Máximo in the process.

"I'm ready for shoes!"

"Okay- Okay!" Máximo laughed and put his hands up. "I was going to say, you might not be ready for laces- I won't lie *amigo*, it took me till I was nine to learn how to properly lace my shoes. You're a fast learner, but maybe we should stick to slip-ons or Velcro."

Matthew thought about it for a moment. "Okay... what is Velcro?"

"A god-send, my friend. A god-send."

Turns out Velcro was indeed a god-send. It was simple to use and adjust. One day Matthew will master laces, but for now he was happy with Velcro. Still, Matthew got lots of things. Lots of things indeed. So many that he was surprised by it all.

Matthew learned that humans have clothes they put on UNDER their clothes called underwear. It was so alien and foreign that Matthew just felt confused by the end of the day.

So, in the end, they went back to Maximo's apartment when all was said and done. From there they put Matthew's things in a neat pile on the floor of the living room. "I'll figure out where to put all of this stuff later, just get dressed properly." He urged Matthew to the bathroom. "Underwear, pants, shirt, socks, and shoes." Máximo reminded him of the order in which to put stuff on.

"Okay! Okay!" Matthew heard the door shut behind him and he stared at the small bathroom. He was slowly, oh so slowly, learning things about humans. It turns out these 'bathrooms' were used when humans needed privacy and more. It was used for them to get clean and do their business. Which again, Matthew didn't know. If he had to go he'd just go in the ocean, but humans were more sophisticated than that. Humans had a solution for everything.

Matthew licked his lips as he got himself dressed and ready, the way Máximo had shown him. He looked at himself in the mirror and just couldn't believe *that's* what he looked like. His hair, he knew he was blonde, and he's seen himself in reflections in the water before but never to this clear of a degree- well as clear as his eyes would allow. He still needed to see an eye doctor. Still, his hair didn't seem or feel right. When in the water it was always so silky smooth, but now it was dried and crusted from the salty ocean water.

"Matt? You done?"

"Yeah, you can come in."

So, Máximo did just that. He saw Matthew leaning in to get a good look at himself in the mirror. "Tomorrow we'll get your eyes checked." He reassured Matthew in a softer voice. He was wearing something different, out of his cop uniform, and into more relaxed clothing by the looks of it. Shorts, T-shirt, and flip-flops.

"What's wrong with my hair? I mean I know it's dried, but why is it..." Matthew didn't know how to finish it.

"Tangled?" Máximo questioned with a raised brow. "You've been running about a lot, and I doubt you've had a shower in a hot minute. Probably tonight I'll teach you about the shower, but we don't have time now." He looks at his watch briefly before back at Matthew.

Máximo then grabbed something with bristles at the end of it, before Matthew could ask his head was attacked and his hair is roughly pulled down by this object. "Ouch!" Matthew couldn't stop his hiss of pain as his face scrunched up. "What- ouch!" His hair was giving Máximo a fight it seemed.

"It's a hairbrush, I'm just brushing the tangles out. Don't worry, *amigo*. I feel your pain. I remember my mom trying to braid my hair and it *hurt*. It hurt like a bitch." Máximo shook his head at the memory. Matthew cringed, winced, and hissed in discomfort and pain as this hairbrush untangled his hair from top to bottom.

"Jesus..." Matthew breathed once Máximo was done and he set the brush down. "Ouch." He rubbed the top of his head. Still, in the mirror, he could see that his hair looked a lot better. It was wavy, something he was sure couldn't be changed. His hair still felt strange to the touch as it wasn't wet. This was going to take a lot of getting used to.

"Okay, we should get going."

"You know where he lives?" Matthew couldn't help but question as he followed Máximo out of the bathroom and towards the Living room.

"Yeah." Máximo let the whole conversation drop off right there and Matthew decided not to press it. So, even though they've only been there for about thirty minutes they were soon leaving the apartment and went back to the car.

Once they were in the car, Máximo started driving down the road and only seconds after this he started talking again. "I need to ask, are you and Gilbert a *thing*?"

'What does he mean by that?' Matthew knew he wasn't hiding his confusion well, but it was a good thing that Máximo was paying attention to the road. There was something about his tone that made Matthew uneasy like he was insinuating something, but what?

Well, it seemed his confusion was noted after all because Máximo simply grunted. "Forget it. I'm sure it's not that." He decided on a dime and the conversation was dropped. Matthew sighed out and looked out of the window. Even though he couldn't see properly that didn't stop him from noting just how close to the beach Gilbert was. His apartment was just a block away from the beach and that made Matthew rather nervous. He knew they weren't going to go swimming, he knew his secret would be kept for now, but still, he didn't like being this close.

Máximo parked in a spot and sighed before relaxing in his seat. "Now, I know you already told me how you two met, but is there anything else I need to know?"

"Like what?" Matthew tilted his head and his hair followed his movement.

"I don't know. Does he know about your dad?"

"Never came up."

"Does he know your brothers?"

"Nope, I mean I told him about them but I doubt they met... Oh! Feli might have known something!" In the haze of everything that's happened, he forgot about what Feliciano told him.

"What?"

"Yeah, I think he saw one of my brothers! He mentioned something about a neighbor and a naked kid-"

"Okay, that's concerning..." Máximo sighed as he wrote that down in a notepad he kept in his cupholder.

"Yeah, but he said he didn't get a good look..."

"Did he mention the neighbor by name?"

"Uh..." Matthew frowned as his brow furrowed. "No." He realized, he never even thought about asking for the neighbor's name. Máximo ticked his tongue in response.

"Maybe Gilbert will know, though I doubt."

Matthew knew that tone that Máximo was speaking with. It was contempt, it was a tone that Peter used all the damn time. "Máximo? Do you not like Gilbert?"

Máximo made a rather unimpressed face. "That obvious? No, I *don't* care for Gilbert, and he doesn't care for me. If I'm being honest I'd rather not even have this dinner, but if he knows information about you and your brothers then I have to suck my pride down."

"Can I ask why?"

Máximo scowled and Matthew hoped he didn't overstep, if he did Máximo didn't say it as he just spoke. "Forgetting all the times I had to shove him in the back of my cop car? Forgetting the fact that he talked my cousin out of getting a job as a cop? Forgetting the time he got drunk and kicked me in the face? I don't like his attitude, his personality, how loud he is- I don't like *him*." Máximo huffed as he tapped his fingers on his steering wheel. "Let's not forget about what happened to Francis- you know what, I've said too much. Let's just get this over with." With that Máximo took his keys out of the ignition and got out of the car quickly.

"Huh, he's never mentioned a Francis..." Matthew spoke softly to himself as he left the car, but that was quickly out of his mind as they approached the apartments and walked up the stairs.

Turns out Gilbert lived on the third floor, and he had a pretty good view of the beach from the stairs. Matthew could make out the shapes of the people running about along the beach and he could make out some people swimming-

or was he seeing his own kind swimming and doing what they could to blend in with the humans like he had?

"...You really like the beach, huh?" Máximo asked as he knocked at the door.

"...You could say that." Matthew sighed and turned away.

Was his dad alright? Had Marius advanced already? Matthew had no way of knowing up here on the surface and deep down, despite his excitement of being with the humans, he was still worried for his father, brother, and sister. Matthew never met Marius and he didn't need to in order to know just how powerful of a merman Marius was.

The apartment door opened and Matthew looked at Gilbert. Ludwig was down by his brother's left leg, and oh-

"I thought you said Feliciano wasn't joining us?" Máximo was 100% judging and the tone wasn't subtle. Feliciano grabbed on to Gilbert's right leg and tried to make himself appear small.

"Yeah, great job getting Eliza to calm down-" Gilbert growled in a sarcastic voice. "Now they're fighting at their house and I have little Feli with me." Gilbert explained in the same judging tone that Máximo was giving him.

Máximo sucked in a deep breath, clearly trying to keep his anger at bay. That was when Matthew stepped in to try and get them to calm down before they butted heads. "That's alright! More people, right?" smiled at Gilbert and stepped up between him and Máximo.

Gilbert's face turned a slight shade of pink as he rubbed the back of his head. "*Ja*, I guess. Come in." He invited Matthew in and for a moment Matthew wondered if Gilbert would do the same for Máximo. Gilbert said nothing as he stepped to the side and just allowed Máximo in.

"Why is that kid in a dress exactly?" Máximo questioned as he stepped inside and he looked down at Feliciano.

"Because he likes it," Ludwig spoke up for Feliciano and he stood beside Feliciano's side in an instant.

"Aight..."

The house smelt of cooking meat and it made Matthew's mouth water. He knew the smell of cooking meat from the humans often coming down and cooking on the beach, and of course from this morning where Máximo cooked bacon. Still, Wrust was something new! It made Matthew excited to try.

"The food is still cooking." Gilbert explained as he went back to the kitchen part of the apartment. The apartment itself was smaller than Maximo's that's for sure. It had two bedrooms and one bathroom by the looks of it but it was rather all crammed together.

Matthew felt a tug on his sleeve and he looked down at Feliciano. So, he crouched down so they were eyelevel. "Yes?" He questioned with a smile. "Ludwig and I were watching *The prince of Egypt*, would you like to watch it with us?"

"Feli, I don't think Matthew would be interested-" Gilbert tried to speak but Máximo cut him off with a sharp and sudden-

"-Actually! Matthew, I think you might be interested in that movie!"

"Yay!" Feliciano grabbed Matthew's hand and started to drag him away towards the bedroom. "I've seen this movie so many times it's my favorite!"

"I've never seen a movie!" Matthew exclaimed to the two children.

"What!? Not a single one?!" Ludwig gasped.

"No?"

"Start it from the beginning! We must change this!" Feliciano announced loudly and just like that Matthew was plopped down in front of a small 'TV'. Flanked on the right by Feliciano

and the left by Ludwig as the movie started.

"Okay, did I hear that right? Did Matt just say he hasn't seen a movie? Like ever?" Gilbert asked once Ludwig's bedroom door snapped shut. He then flipped the cut up potatoes over in a bubbling hot skillet.

"Yeah, you did."

"I knew he was a little strange but... at the store he told me he didn't own any clothes, and Ludwig told me it doesn't seem like he could read?"

"All true."

"...When I met him he seemed so interested in the things I told him. Like stuff about school, reading, and so on... how bad is it?"

"It doesn't seem to be physical if that's what you're asking."

"Hm." Gilbert flipped the potatoes again. "He seemed like an alright guy, I mean I even gave him flowers in an attempt to- you know what? Forget I said that." Gilbert waved the spatula at Máximo in a semi-threatening way.

"Just because it isn't important right now I won't mention it to the boss, but I will say this. Stay away from him. I mean it. That kid isn't well and I don't need someone like *you* manipulating him right now." Máximo spoke firmly and sternly, using his best 'cop' voice. Despite being off-duty.

"Excuse you-" Gilbert hissed as the two men glared at each other. "-... whatever, I doubt it would have worked out anyway." Gilbert deflated as he looked at the potatoes that were starting to brown and crisp up in the oil. Still, a part of Gilbert didn't exactly want to back down... maybe he doesn't need to. "I still want to be friends with him though. He seems like a good guy who just needs some guidance."

"..." Máximo grunted. "He seems fond of you so It's not my place to tell him who and who not to befriend. So whatever. Regardless, I have some questions for you about Matthew."

"Ask away, flat-foot. I don't exactly know a lot."

"For starters, who does Feliciano live next to? Matthew says he might have seen one of his brothers."

"Shit if I know. Rodrich lives in a rich neighborhood."

Máximo huffed. "Great..." And he wrote that down. This was going to be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

I found out that the writing app I used has Text-to-speech this makes proofreading so much easier!

Second guesses

"-...So this...' God' killed the firstborn sons to make his point known?" Matthew tilted his head as he looked down at Feliciano for answers. Feliciano came through, as it seemed he knew all about this story.

"Yep! Because the pharaoh wouldn't listen! So each day the plagues got worse and worse until finally, he sent one final message." Feliciano explained as he jumped a little on Ludwig's bed in response. His green dress billowing out around him as he caught a little air.

"Please don't jump on my bed." Ludwig requested rather reasonably as he went to fix the spot where Feliciano had jumped and made it neat and orderly again.

"But the pharaoh, as you saw, was a jerk and changed his mind and sent an army after them to kill them all." Feliciano continued to explain.

"Yes... what were those... *things* that Moses was carrying at the end of the movie? They looked like rock?"

"Oh, I can answer that one. That's the ten commandments." Ludwig explained.

"The ten... commandments?"

"Yeah you know?... don't you?" Feliciano jumped down so he was right next to Matthew. "Love thy neighbor?"

Matthew tilted his head, now just confused. "What?"

Matthew was sure Feliciano's jaw hit the floor as he looked at Ludwig, who shrugged, and then back at Matthew. "You really know nothing about God and the bible?"

"What is a bible?"

"Okay, that's it." Feliciano's eye twitched in irritation and he turned and marched over to, what looked like, a bag on the floor. While he looked for something Ludwig came up to Matthew.

"Feli is a catholic, same with his brother. Eliza and Rodrich aren't as much, but Feli takes it very seriously as it's what his grandpa taught him." Ludwig explained to Matthew.

"I see.. what's a Catholic?"

"It's a type of religion, look I'm not about to explain every single one to you, I'd be here all day. I would suggest you'd look it up for yourself."

"Here. Maybe this will help you." Feliciano came bounding back over, a book in his hand. It was rather big and when Matthew leafed through it he saw that every page had a picture. "It's a bible, for children. My *fratello* gave it to me, so I expect it back and in good condition, ya

hear?!" It was like a flip was switched as Feliciano's voice turned slightly deeper and his tone became threatening.

"Yes, of course, but if it means so much to you I shouldn't take it-"

"No, I want you to!" Feliciano smiled and his voice became high pitched yet again as he danced around just enough so his dress swayed with his movements.

"Hey-" the door opened and Gilbert poked his head into the room. "Dinner is ready," he announced and Feliciano clapped happily.

"Yay!"

"*Burder-*" And suddenly Ludwig was speaking a whole other language. That wasn't Matthew not understanding, no this was a whole new language. He had no clue what was being said, but Gilbert did as he nodded.

"Maybe tomorrow," Gilbert announced in English as he lightly ruffled Ludwig's hair in response. Ludwig made a face and fixed his hair back to the way he liked it. Then Gilbert brought a hand out for Matthew to take. Matthew did happily and Gilbert pulled him to his feet.

"Thank you, what was that by the way?"

"What was what?"

"That language you were speaking, I haven't heard anything like it," Matthew questioned as he walked beside Gilbert to the kitchen, where Máximo was already sitting at the table waiting for everyone.

"Oh." Gilbert rubbed the back of his head. "I thought it was obvious, I'm German, well, Prussian actually, but that's another conversation for another day." Gilbert then gave his head a shake.

"I see. That's so cool that you know more than one language!"

Gilbert blushed and before he could stop himself he asked the dumbest question he could ask at that moment. "Do you know any other languages?"

'Not unless you count talking to the dolphins and whales...'

"Oi." Máximo kindly reminded them of his presence as he sat at the, rather tiny looking, dining table. He impatiently tapped his fingers on the table before sighing out and speaking. "Gil, Matthew is having issues with English, let alone another language."

Matthew watched as Gilbert's blush deepened before he rubbed the back of his head dumbly. "Sorry."

"No don't be. It's alright. I'm new and still learning things." Matthew smiled as he placed a hand on the upper part of Gilbert's arm. This was the first time he's ever touched Gilbert

before. He'd never let Gilbert get too close during their meetings out by the ocean so this was nice, but it didn't last as Máximo, once again, coughed.

"Not to sound mean but if you don't get over here Beilschmidt, I'm going to start eating." Máximo huffed. That did it as Gilbert quickly turned and went for his seat at the table. Matthew took a seat between Ludwig and Feliciano, across from Máximo and just to the side of Gilbert.

Now, Matthew has never had wurst before. So he was pretty excited as he watched the others grab stuff for themselves. So, he waited for a moment before grabbing a wurst and put it on his plate with some not toast. He watched as Ludwig put his wurst on the not toast and so he did the same and then looked at Feliciano who tugged on his sleeve for attention. "Yes?"

"Past the mustard, please?" Feliciano asked kindly.

'What. Is. Mustard?'

Like Máximo read his mind, he spoke. "Yellow bottle, Matt." He then took a bite of his wurst.

"Oh!" Matthew reached over and handed the bottle to Feliciano who added a small amount to his wurst before taking a nice big bite. *'Two hands.'* Matthew watched Feliciano and used both of his hands before taking a bite.

Gilbert then proceeded to suddenly spit out his drink all over the table before barking out a startled laugh. "No! *Nein!* I did not just see that!" Gilbert slapped the table as a string of "KESESESES!" left his mouth.

"Huh?" Matthew tilted his head unsure as to why Gilbert was laughing, laughing at him of all things! He looked to Máximo, but Máximo had his face in his hands and just shook his head slowly like he was embarrassed.

"*Burder.*" Ludwig huffed rather annoyed before he put his food down and went to Matthew. "You ate it wrong."

"...There's a *wrong* way to eat?"

"*Ja.* Here-" Ludwig then proceeded to gently grab Matthew's wurst and turned it so it faced long ways with the ends facing him, not so the middle was as he had it. "Like that."

"Oh! I can see how this is easier!"

Gilbert sniggered behind his hand and slowly shook his head.

"Yeah, a lot less messy as well." Ludwig then went back to eating his own food like nothing happened. Gilbert was still chuckling to himself but had calmed down. Matthew felt rather embarrassed but tried to continue eating. The wurst was good, the potatoes were really good, but the mood was honestly ruined for Matthew, he didn't want to show it, but he didn't appreciate Gilbert laughing. He was *trying* here.

Still, he kept quiet for the rest of the dinner.

Feliciano and Ludwig talked to one another, but not a word was said between the adults. Matthew did speak a little to Feliciano and Ludwig alike so as not to seem rude.

Gilbert was the first one done, and he was scrolling on his phone. Máximo finished second and sucked in a slow sighing breath. Eventually, the other three finished their food as well. Matthew wiped his mouth from the crumbs that stuck to his face and then watched as Gilbert let out a sudden and exasperated groan that echoed through the kitchen.

"What's up?" Máximo questioned as he grabbed Matthew's plate and his own to bring to the sink.

"Eliza wants to pick Feliciano up."

"Yay!" Feliciano cheered.

Gilbert blew a raspberry and leaned back into his seat so far that Matthew was worried he might fall as he started to rock the chair on two legs. "But Lovino *followed* her. Now they're on the beach fighting!"

Máximo put the plates in the sink. "Jesus Christ! Don't they give up?"

"No, I think she really pissed Lovino off."

"..." Máximo sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Where on the beach? I'll put an end to this."

"You're off the cloooooock." Gilbert all but whined as he threw his head back dramatically.

"It's fine. Seriously."

Gilbert let out another sigh. "... just a few yards away from the apartment." He caved.

"Fine. Feliciano, come on. You as well Matthew."

"I'll come as well. because..." Gilbert finally sat upright before standing and gave Feliciano the side-eye before choosing to whisper something into Máximo's ear. Who just nodded in understanding. "Ludwig? You wanna come?" Gilbert asked.

"Sure." Ludwig shrugged. Matthew was the only one not wanting to go to the beach for a very *obvious* reason. A reason he couldn't start to explain because Gilbert has met him in the ocean so he can't use the excuse that he couldn't swim. Matthew swallowed a hard lump down as he realized his mouth suddenly became dry.

'Just keep away from the water.' He told himself. *'far away from the water.'* that wasn't reassuring, but that's just what he'll have to do. As long as his legs didn't get wet he'd be fine.

So Matthew, very reluctantly, followed the rest outside where a nice summer breeze was there to meet them once the apartment door shut. They started to walk, but immediately Matthew

got distracted by a couple of pink and red flowers that looked rather familiar to him. Matthew paid the fence no mind as he reached over and touched a flower-

"Ah!" Gilbert let a noise that almost sounded like a shriek of panic. He then raced up to Matthew and put his arms around Matthew's shoulders as to bring his hands away from the flowers. "Unless you want to meet Mr. Broomstick I wouldn't suggest picking those," Gilbert explained with a worried voice as he looked over his shoulder like he expected someone to come rushing at them as they walked away.

"Mr. Broomstick? Is that your neighbor?"

"What- no. Mr. Broomstick is my neighbor's weapon of choice for those that dare pick from his garden." Gilbert explained and he quickly caught Matthew up with the others. Since the beach was so close they were walking there not driving, which was fine by Matthew. It was a lovely evening after all. The sun was starting to set and the air was becoming cooler, this was helped by the sea breeze that wafted their way.

And in all honesty, it just felt nice for Matthew because Gilbert still kept his arms around his shoulders as they walked. Gilbert stood to the side of Matthew and he was just so close, closer than ever before, to the point that Matthew could actually see Gilbert's face more clearly.

"Heh. See something you like, Birdie?" Gilbert chortled once he realized that Matthew was looking at him. Matthew felt his face turn hot and he looked away.

"Sorry, I've just never been this close to you before."

Máximo gave a grunt from ahead but said nothing, then did Gilbert let go of Matthew rather quickly and suddenly. Matthew frowned a little at this but still respected Gilbert's choice and just kept walking forward. They were getting close now, the sand right under their shoes on the pavement below, but the closer they got to the beach the sound of yelling and arguing became clearer. Gilbert's previously vacant hands became occupied. First by Feliciano and then by Ludwig.

Matthew watched them out of the corner of his eye but didn't question it as he picked up the speed so he was right next to Máximo. "Hey," Máximo spoke in a simple tone as he looked at Matthew. "This might get loud and maybe even violent, if you could stand by with Gilbert and the children away from the ruckus I would greatly appreciate it."

"Oh. Okay, no problem... but why would it get violent?"

Máximo shook his head in response. "Just... bad blood is all it is."

"Bad blood..." Matthew spoke it more to himself than to Máximo, but still it was heard.

"They have a sort of rivalry going on and it's resulting in people getting hurt."

"Oh. I know that feeling."

"Do you?"

"My dad has one of those. I never met the guy, but they don't get along and constantly start fights."

"Would this be that Marius guy you mentioned earlier?"

"..." Matthew looked away making sure to keep his mouth shut this time around. Damn him and his big mouth. He really should stop spilling family secrets.

Still, if Máximo wanted to pry, he couldn't now because they were on the beach.

Despite the otherworldly fairy-tale glow the beach had as the sun was starting to set and the sky was turning a blood orange color, there stood the same two people from the store. Once again they were screaming at each other.

Matthew couldn't even tell what was being said over them yelling over one another. He wanted to walk with Máximo, but his sleeve was grabbed by Feliciano- "Come build a sand castle with me!" Feliciano demanded as he raced down towards the shoreline and Matthew froze in place. Ludwig followed Feliciano obediently and Gilbert went to oversee the children, but stopped as it was clear that Matthew froze and was now making a worried face.

"What's wrong, Birdie?" Gilbert asked as Matthew found himself fidgeting with his own fingers in an attempt to calm down, it wasn't working and his heart was starting to pound.

Maximo's voice roared through the air stopping the fight briefly. "Alright, you two! Break it up! I swear to god, I *will* arrest you if needed!"

"Birdie?" Gilbert brought Matthew back.

"I-I can't be near the w-water... not now anyway." Matthew stuttered as he lied and looked down quickly.

"But you're always swimming."

"I just..." He tried to think of a good enough lie but none were coming to his mind at this moment. "Don't want to be near it, okay?" He all but whispered and moved his gaze away from Gilbert.

Gilbert let out a breathy laugh before shaking his head. "You know, you've been hiding something... and it's kind of unawesome."

"Excuse me," Matthew growled immediately as he took a startled step back and put a hand on his chest.

"Look, everyone has their secrets, I get it, but... I don't buy it. Not with you. They say your dad is this weird maniac, but yet you're able to get out and swim every night? That's weird."

"You don't know my life, Gilbert, and I would appreciate it if you wouldn't pry right now."

Gilbert threw his hands up and shook his head. "I just don't get you, Birdie. I don't. I want to help, but watching you stumble and fall and lie about it all, I don't think you want the proper

help."

"I-Ug-mm." Matthew clenched his fists and bit his lip. If only Gilbert knew, but Gilbert can't know! He just can't, nobody can. "I..." Matthew looked back at Gilbert, ready to respond, maybe snap, yell, but before he could something caught his eye behind Gilbert, where the children were.

Was that Liam in the water? It kinda looked like him, but... Liam would never openly show himself to humans. Matthew knew his eyes didn't work properly on the land, but the build of the person and the dark brown hair with the two curls that poked up was telling Matthew that that *was* his oldest brother.

So why the hell was he showing himself to humans and more importantly why was he beckoning the children!?

And it was working as Feliciano was making steps towards the water with Ludwig not far behind.

"- Hey!" All thoughts and secrets fled from Matthew's mind as he pushed past Gilbert, Gilbert obviously looked where Matthew had and went running after him towards the children.

Matthew's heart absolutely raced as he ran through the sand as fast as his newfound legs could carry him. The closer he got the better he could see and he could see that it *was* in fact Liam. Liam's hand was outstretched waiting for Feliciano to take it, but Matthew wasn't going to let that happen no.

Once in range he snatched Feliciano up and turned quickly before the waves could come in and take the children in their unforgiving grip. He held Feliciano on his hip for just a moment before he was sure they were safe from the waves.

"Asshole!" Gilbert snarled as he raced up towards the shoreline. Ludwig stood behind his brother and he looked completely shaken up. His face pale and his whole frame shook from his head to his toes. "Come back here!" Gilbert raised his fist at the sea as Liam was now gone.

"What happened!?" Máximo came rushing over, Elizaveta and Lovino quickly rushed to Feliciano's side.

"Some piece of shit just tried to take the kids!" Gilbert completely raged. Elizaveta gasped and held Feliciano close to her.

"What?! Where?!" Máximo snarled as he rushed to the shoreline right beside Gilbert.

"He was in the ocean! He swam off the moment Matt and I came rushing in."

Feliciano let out a soft sob and Matthew could see that he was also very shaken up as he shook from his head down to his feet. His eyes were fully opened showing no shortage of tears. "I-I-I don't know what happened, I just- he promised-" Feliciano tried to explain himself but was silenced.

"Easy, *fratello*, deep breaths," Lovino spoke in a demanding tone, but it was soft so not to startle his brother even more.

Matthew just sat there in the sand looking out at the crashing waves. He wasn't aware of it, but his breathing had turned heavy while his heart pounded at an unusually fast rate. He just couldn't believe it. He was there and he still couldn't believe it. *'Liam... what the hell happened? Since when did he start to act more like a siren?'* Matthew speculated. He figured that had to be siren speak if what Feliciano had said was true. If Liam 'promised' something to him in return for him to come into the ocean.

"-It was the nice man, though!" Feliciano's cry brought Matthew back for just a moment. "I didn't think he'd do anything to harm me!" Feliciano wiped his eyes sloppily.

"The nice man? You've met him before, love?" Elizaveta raised her eyebrows in shock.

"Wait are you talking about last summer?" Gilbert questioned.

"What happened last summer?" Máximo inquired.

"He almost drowned," Lovino spoke next as he looked down at his shoes. "It was my fault I was watching him... We never told you because we figured you'd throw this back in our face." Lovino hissed at Elizaveta in particular.

"The nice man saved me! I remember him clearly!" Feliciano yelled in defense.

Matthew felt his heart just stop. Liam? Saving a human? More likely than one would think it seems.

"Feli, you said he had a fishtail when it happened, obviously nobody was going to take you seriously with that claim, so... we decided to hide it." Lovino threw his hands up in annoyance.

"We!?" Elizaveta put her hands on her hips before pushing Feliciano behind her. "Who the hell is we!? It's Antonio isn't it-"

If Lovino was drowning; he was going to make others drown with him. Matthew made his observation as he watched Lovino point directly at Gilbert. Gilbert awkwardly rubbed his knuckles. "I might...have- Unawesomely- told Lovino to keep this a secret."

Elizaveta's face turned red, her brow furrowed, and her lips pressed tightly into a thin line. "Urg!- Come on Feli!" With that bark she snatched Feliciano by the arm. "Assholes!" She shot back at the duo, this caused Gilbert to flinch greatly but Lovino looked unbothered.

Matthew raised an eyebrow at all of them before looking back out at the ocean. *'The nice man saved me...'* something happened that whole day Matthew was gone, something horrible. He just knew it. There's no way Liam would just up and decide to murder children, especially if he saved them before. So now Matthew was wondering if maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him...

Or if something more nefarious was going on under the ocean's depths while he was away.

A long night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Andersen sighed as he walked into his shared home. His Roommate, Lukas, was already getting dinner ready. Emil charged right past Andersen and into the kitchen where he would soon throw his backpack over the edge of a chair and pull up to do some of his schoolwork if he had any that is. Emil probably finished any and all schoolwork in the Teddy Room.

It was a nice setup Andersen and Lukas had.

They didn't originally intend on being roommates in fact Andersen didn't even know Lukas when it happened three years ago

Lukas needed a place to stay with his baby brother as they both were homeless at the time and Lukas straight-up knocked on Andersen's door and just asked to stay the night. One night, no more than that he swore and promised, originally Andersen was just going to turn them away but looking at little Emil and a very skinny Lukas he couldn't do it. Andersen decided to take the two of them in so Emil wouldn't sleep on the streets anymore.

Eventually, it turned into a roommate situation. Which was great, don't tell a soul, but Andersen was starting to get a tad lonely at the time. Lukas and Emil were a little strange in their own rights, but nothing rang any alarm bells, well they were perfectly fine now, in fact, thanks to Andersen's pushing Lukas was working on getting a degree in forensics and wasn't as skinny as he once was.

"Big brother, we're back." Emil was the one to announce while Andersen got to work on loosening his tie. God how he didn't care for these things.

Andersen rounded the corner as Lukas spoke next. "Oh? How was it?"

Emil shrugged. "Met a weirdo."

"Emil-" Andersen walked over and ruffled Emil's hair slightly. "Don't call him that."

"Oh?" Lukas inquired as he was focusing back on the food, though now he was reaching into a cabinet for a mug.

"Yeah-" Andersen sat down at the table and sighed. "Máxi brought some guy in, I don't know the full story, but he's... uneducated? It's an odd situation. He didn't know *anything*."

Lukas hummed. "Probably some Anti-vaxxer parent, I'm sure." Lukas then walked away from the stove and over to Andersen where he handed him a cup of coffee, a nightly thing between them. Andersen gave him a thankful smile and then brought the hot drink up to his lips careful not to burn his tongue. "Regardless, thank you for bringing Emil with you, Andersen, I do appreciate it."

"No problem, everyone down at the precinct loves him, and he's quiet. So that's always a plus. But you have to tell your work to stop calling you in on the fly."

Lukas chuckled at that. "You've clearly never worked retail." Lukas went back to the food, but he didn't stay for long as it seemed a thought hit him when a surprised "Oh!" Suddenly left his mouth and he came rushing back to Andersen like his life suddenly depended on it. "You'll never guess who got in contact with me!"

"Your missing family?" Andersen joked that earned his loose tie to earn a harsh jerk upwards.

"Ha-ha! This is serious. Tino did."

Andersen's joking mood shifted as Lukas let go of his tie, the whole mood around the table turned rather gloomy. "Emil, can you go to your bedroom, please?" Andersen cleared his throat. Emil looked ready to protest but stopped when Lukas nodded at him. So, he left. The moment his door shut, Andersen let out a slow sigh. "I haven't heard from them since-"

"Yeah, I know. I almost cried when I heard his voice."

"How are they-?"

"Fine, getting by." Lukas, forgetting about all of his cooking food, sat down next to Andersen at the table. He then tapped the table with his fingers for just a moment before sighing. "They really wanted to talk to you about something but you were at work. He said he didn't want to bug you, so he wanted me to tell you to call him back."

Andersen sighed and rubbed his face. "I'm not gonna lie, I wish you would have told me at work. I could have made the time."

Lukas gave a shrug in response. "I'm sorry, I was at work at the time as well, but Tino seemed absolutely *adamant* that he wanted to talk to you in particular."

Andersen let out a soft hum in thought. "You don't think it's about-"

"-Probably is. You know they don't think it was an accident."

Andersen tapped his fingers against the wood of the table. "That's why they cut me off..."

"It wasn't your call and they were grieving." Lukas thought about it. "Knowing Tino... he's probably wanting to apologize for yelling at you the way he did."

"Yeah... trust me, if I could convince my boss to reopen Sven's case I would, but he said it was a clear and dry case of accidental drowning." Andersen shook his head and the air became uncomfortably tense around them. "... " Andersen put his mug down with a soft 'clink' as the ceramic rested against the wood of the table. "I should call him back." Andersen stood up and started to go towards his bedroom, but paused just momentarily to look back at Lukas. "How about a kiss for good luck?" Andersen gave Lukas a bit of a goofy grin as he asked and Lukas chuckled before shaking his head and walking over towards Andersen.

"Oh shit-" Andersen gave a nervous laugh, clearly he didn't think his request would work. Lukas simply fixed Andersen's screwed up tie.

"I'm out of kisses, but how about some advice? Don't you dare mention Sven to Tino."

"Yeah, no kidding." Andersen looked swallowed hard and made his way to his bedroom. He shut his door silently, looked at his cellphone, and just looked at Tino's name for a good hard minute, and with his thumb hovering over the call button he froze.

Andersen remembered the funeral, the black everyone wore, the tears in all of their eyes. little ten-year-old Sven's body in a casket.

He could only squeeze the blankets beneath him and grit his teeth.

Tino and Berwald were on the beach with their adopted son, Sven. Sven went swimming, according to Tino he was staying in the shallows, then Tino said he looked away for a moment to talk to Berwald and when he looked back Sven was gone. Tino said he jumped in the water right away with Berwald to find Sven when Sven didn't immediately pop back up. Cops were called less than ten minutes later.

Sven's body was found a week later on the western side of the beach.

The official cause of death was drowning obviously. Forensics say Sven was most likely caught in a rip-tide and struggled till he drowned.

Tino argued and pleaded that it couldn't have possibly been a rip-tide as he and Berwald had jumped right into the ocean and weren't dragged out to sea, but the case was closed. Maybe Andersen should have made a case or offered to do some more investigating for Tino and Berwald, but he didn't, and Tino-

Jesus, Tino took that to full offense. It was a side of Tino that Andersen never ever wanted to see again. Tino yelled, he screamed, and if it weren't for Berwald holding him back he probably would have gotten physical. The last time Andersen saw Tino and Berwald was at the funeral.

That was almost a year ago. So hitting this little button was a bit of a big deal and Andersen just needed a full second to take it all in and with a slow exhale out of his mouth he hit the button.

Tino answered on the third ring.

"Hei?"

"Hey, Tino. It's your cool brother-in-law!" Andersen worried he might have started that off wrong or too strong.

"Andersen... I missed your voice." Tino breathed out on the other end of the line. "I... I'm sorry-"

"It's all cool, look... I understand. I do." Andersen wanted to try and put Tino's mind at ease and he did his best not to mention anything specific so as not to trigger Tino in any way, shape, or form. "Lukas said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Uh, yeah..." Tino paused on the other side of the phone. A second passed, then two, four, eight, ten-

"You still there, Tino?"

"Yeah, I'm just trying to figure out a way to say this..." Andersen heard Tino exhale an uneasy sigh as it was clear that something was on his mind.

"Take your time... How's Berwald?"

"... He's... better now. It was a little iffy there for a while but-..." A pause. Seconds ticked away again and Andersen wondered if the call dropped, but then Tino finally found his voice. "Andersen?"

"Still here."

"... You see... there's a boy."

"A boy?" Andersen felt confused and wondered if Tino might be drunk.

"Yes, a boy. A little boy- Andersen, a boy *found us*!" Tino whispered his tone shifted and he sounded unbelievably over the moon. "You don't understand, we didn't find him, he sniffed us out. The other day... Berwald and I- we went back to the beach as it was the anniversary-" Tino paused again and Andersen could feel Tino's grimace from the other side of the phone. "Well regardless, Berwald had lost his glasses and... yesterday a boy came knocking on our door. He had Berwald's glasses. Andersen, the kid has no family!" Tino finally cut to the chase.

For some reason the happy undertone that Tino had made Andersen uneasy. "At least... that's what he says... Andersen I'm calling not just to apologize but... as much as I want to just take this kid and run... I need to ask you a favor."

"Which is what?" Andersen swallowed a lump in his throat.

"... I'm going to send you a picture... can... can you please make sure he's not a runaway?" The hurt was there in Tino's voice. Andersen heard Tino let out a sharp intake of breath, clearly just asking this was tearing him up inside. Of course, it would. It would hurt anyone in Tino's situation.

"... Of course, Tino."

"Berwald... he's absolutely in love and smitten with this child. He doesn't want to do this, but it wouldn't be right... you know?"

"Yeah." Andersen relaxed just a bit.

"Thank you."

"Tino?"

"Yes?"

"... You should come over for dinner sometime. I know Lukas and Emil also miss you two."

"I'd like that, Andersen."

Matthew learned something interesting. Something that surprised him. The water humans used did not affect his legs as it wasn't ocean water. He found this out when he stepped into a 'shower' that late-night under Maximo's orders. He was absolutely terrified that his little secret was completely over right then and there. As Matthew couldn't exactly tell Máximo he couldn't shower. Yet, when he stepped into the warm water... nothing happened.

That was a relief, a huge one, and a weight was lifted from his shoulders. His father's words did echo back at him at that moment in the shower. *'As long as you don't go back into the ocean you'll be fine.'*

Máximo was nice enough, or just shy, to give Matthew instruction through the door on how to bathe. "-I mean it, *amigo*, do not open your eyes when you use shampoo, you'll regret it!" was one of his warnings. Matthew found the Shampoo, he saw it started with an 'S'. He was learning! Still, he was curious and did accidentally open his eyes while washing his hair.

Yeah, he regretted that as his eyes started to sting.

"Gah!"

"I warned you, dammit!"

It was not a pleasant feeling, but he found the stinging pain went away after a while.

Still, aside from that little hiccup, Matthew got clean and holy crap, he smelt *amazing*. All sorts of aromas that he didn't even know existed. He got himself dried and dressed into 'night clothes' as Máximo put it. The funny thing was Máximo forgot to buy these clothes so he just gave Matthew a very large shirt that went down to his ankles. "How big is this shirt?" Matthew asked as he sat down on the couch.

"Ah..." Máximo scratched his head awkwardly as a blush crept across his face. "Big enough." he finally settled on saying. He then coughed and tried to straighten himself up. "I'm sure you're probably tired-"

"-I'm not-"

"-Good. Because we still have to go over the alphabet before you see the eye doctor."

"Cool." Matthew grinned, but in the back of his mind, he was thinking of Liam still. He still just couldn't get over seeing his oldest brother trying to beckon the children into the ocean.

Why? Especially when Liam saved them before. He was trying to not let his mask slip so Máximo couldn't see his uneasy state.

"Okay." Máximo sighed and sat down right next to Matthew and pulled out a sheet.

This sheet had letters. They were both big and small.

"Alright, now it's the most important we get you recognizing letters first and foremost, we'll get to reading tomorrow after the appointment, but you see during your eye exam the doctor is going to ask you to read letters, not words."

"Gotcha."

"Good." Máximo nodded. "So this order of letters you see here? It's called Alphabetical. It's a certain order they're in and it starts with this-" He pointed to the first letter. "A."

"A."

He moved his finger to the next letter. "B."

"B."

"Good. C."

"C."

The lesson went on like that for a good while, Máximo showed him each letter and pronounced them, the third time around he silently pointed to them and let Matthew pronounce them. The fourth time around, he pointed to each letter in random order to test Matthew. Matthew wasn't perfect at it but he was starting to understand.

But Máximo wasn't done. "This will help you learn them better as well." He put the paper down on the table and pulled out something long, thin, and yellow. "This is a pencil." He showed Matthew, he showed the pencil off for a moment. "We use it to write."

"Like a crayon?"

"Almost, but a pencil has a finer tip, is used mainly for writing, and is made of lead. Now did Emil show you how to hold a crayon?"

Matthew nodded and so did Máximo. "Good, hold this the way you did the crayon."

Matthew did. Then Máximo put his hand on Matthew's in an attempt to guide him. With gentle persuasion, he helped Matthew put just enough pressure down to write. "You don't need to add a lot of pressure, just enough to make a mark," Máximo instructed. Then he helped Matthew write for the first time. Matthew wrote a big and sloppy 'A' on the paper. Máximo could see the stars in Matthew's eyes as he looked down excited at the writing.

Máximo would be lying if he said Matthew's excited face didn't make him smile in return.

Then like that it was on for Matthew, wanting to learn and be the best he could be. It took to the letter 'E' before Matthew started writing by himself without Maximo's help. He really was a fast learner. Still, Máximo went over the alphabet a few more times, enough times for Matthew to start to get bored, maybe even tired, of reciting the same letters over and over again.

Máximo lost count of how many times they went over the alphabet but he did grow tired himself and his back was getting stiff. "Alright, *amigo*, it's almost midnight, I'm getting tired. We'll do this one more time in the morning, alright?"

"Alright!" Matthew smiled sweetly as Máximo stood from his spot on the couch and stretched before rubbing his lower back.

"Oh," before Máximo completely walked away he paused. "And Matthew... you sleep with the pillow *under* your head. Not beside it." That's not what he originally wanted to say. Matthew could see it written all over Maximo's face as he paused in the middle of the sentence.

"Of course, silly me." Matthew smiled and pushed his questions down.

"Good night, Mattie," Máximo called before retreating to his bedroom. The door clicked shut and soon Matthew was engulfed in darkness. He rested his head on the pillow and threw the covers over his body, but sleep didn't want to come to him

Matthew had too many questions swirling in his mind. His mind just kept flashing back to Liam. Yeah, the teaching was a good distraction, but that's all it was, and probably why Matthew was so eager to learn, it was all so he could distract his mind. Well, the distraction was over and reality was starting to set in. It was a horrible reality.

The questions were endless. 'Why save the kid just to drown him a year later?'

'Why are you attempting to drown children?'

'Marius?'

'Does dad know?'

Dad hates humans, this is true, but... to drown the children? That just seems barbaric and completely unlike his father or Liam. Matthew tossed and turned hoping for the sweet embrace of sleep and yes, it did eventually come, but it came far too late for Matthew's liking as his mind was still restless, the last thing he remembered thinking was 'I should talk to Dad or Liam myself if I'm given the opportunity.' and he hoped to do that in the coming days.

Kiku was warming up to Alfred. Of course, he was already warm with Alfred before this but he was warming just enough to lean into Alfred's arms as they both lazily watched TV. This was *obviously* a big deal as before Alfred wasn't even allowed to touch Kiku, but now Kiku was allowing it. He even allowed it when Alfred wrapped his arm around his shoulder. Alfred could make out the blush Kiku had and just smiled to himself as he blushed as well. Neither

of them making eye contact with the other. The light of the TV bounced around Kiku's face and it was at that exact moment did Alfred decide: *Yeah, I made the right choice.*

Alfred frowned a little as his mind was forced back to his father-

Alfred smiled as he approached the familiar blue and white skiff boat. He didn't fully approach it, not yet, instead, he playfully poked his eyes up over the water to watch his prey. Kiku's back was turned and he was casting his net out to try and catch some fish. A little evil grin grew across Alfred's face as he stealthily slinked along the water, using his tail almost like a sea snake or eel would. He didn't want to splash or make noise.

Alfred bit his lip as he grew close enough to touch the boat, he was ready to throw his whole weight on one side and send Kiku falling down, maybe even causing Kiku to yell out in shock but the moment he touched the cold metal of the boat-

"Don't even think about it, Alfred-san." Kiku turned his head to look at Alfred in question.

"Aw!" Alfred cried out in disappointment and even threw his hands up in the air. He then pouted and crossed his arms. "How'd you know?" Alfred swam onto his back bringing his tail forward now.

"You are very predictable," Kiku explained emotionlessly as he started to throw some bait out into the water for the fish.

Alfred swam down under the water and moved under the boat, careful not to hit the propeller or get caught in the net. He learned that lesson.

*If it were anybody else, or even a big fishing boat Alfred would have cut the fish free, but Kiku explained how he needed the fish to eat and Alfred accepted it. For Alfred, Kiku was the **only** human he allowed to capture the fish. Was Alfred showing favoritism? Maybe.*

After all, Kiku made a good point, the merpeople ate fish so shouldn't the humans?

Alfred popped his head upon the other side of the boat so he and Kiku were facing each other. "Did you bring me anything today?" Alfred asked as he rested his arms on the edge of the boat. He then rested his head on his arms.

"As a matter of fact, I did." Kiku reached into the bag he kept by his chair.

"Awesome! Thank you."

"You haven't even gotten it yet."

"I know, but still, thank you. I love the little trinkets you give me."

Kiku's face turned a slight shade of pink as he continued to rifle through the bag until he found what he was looking for. He came over to the edge of the boat and got down on both of his knees so they were at level. With both of his hands, he offered his trinket to Alfred. It was small and plastic, a toy.

Alfred was ecstatic. "Wow!" He picked the toy up and inspected it for a few moments. It looked to be a land animal, it was so cute! "What is it?"

"A dog."

"It's adorable!" Alfred held it close to his chest. "Thank you- oh, I got you something!"

"Alfred-san, you didn't-" But before Kiku could finish Alfred went under the water. Alfred overheard two fishermen talking about gifting people who would gift them first. So it was only right for Alfred to gift Kiku in return, right?

So, already prepared ahead of time, as Kiku fished at the same spot, Alfred already had his gift waiting. He hid it in an old octopus nest that was no longer in use. He stuck his hand between the two rocks and pulled out the shiniest and strangest stone he's ever seen. Quietly he put his new trinket in between the rocks for safekeeping and went back towards the surface. He hoped Kiku liked this strange sparkling stone.

Alfred excitedly broke for the surface and went for the same way towards the boat. As this shiny stone was small he only used his open palm to show it off to Kiku.

"Where..." Kiku questioned with wide eyes breaking his emotionless facade.

"It's the shiniest stone I've ever seen! We like shiny things, so I thought maybe you might like the shiny stone as well!"

Kiku went for it but stopped and instead pulled back. "I- Alfred-san, I really can't accept this."

"Take it! I insist."

"... you didn't take this from someone did you?"

"Huh? No, I found it! Like I said."

That did seem to ease Kiku's mind a little and he grabbed the weird, sun-colored stone that had a perfectly round center, from Alfred. "Thank you."

"No problem! It's the least I could do with all the gifts you've given me!"

Alfred and Kiku stayed in the spot and talked for hours, they talked for so long that by the time Kiku was packing up to leave now with more fish in his cooler, the sun was starting to set. It truly did hurt Alfred to have to see Kiku go. Every time they had to say their goodbyes it hurt and just reminded Alfred that they weren't the same species.

"See you tomorrow?" Kiku gave just the faintest smile at Alfred's question.

"Of course, Alfred-san, I wouldn't miss it."

"Bye."

"Goodbye."

With those parting words, Alfred went back under the water and stayed clear as the boat roared to life. Those propellers were something to be feared as they rolled and twirled at dangerous speeds that could cut a fish to bloody bits. Still, Alfred watched and waited as the boat moved until it was eventually out of his view.

Alfred just smiled to himself before doing a happy flip in the water. Kiku just made him so gleeful even if watching him leave was one of the more heartbreaking things.

Still, Alfred was eager and ready to add his new trinket to his ever-growing, little, collection of things that he knew to keep hidden from his father-

But Alfred's heart absolutely sank when he made his way back towards the abandoned octopus nest as his father was there.

How much had he seen?

It seemed he saw enough as his dad was now holding the toy dog in his hand and was looking at it with an obscene amount of disgust. Like this toy had personally hurt him.

Alfred swallowed hard and resisted the urge to snatch the toy out of his dad's grip.

"-You know." His father started only seconds later. He never once looked at Alfred, just at the toy. "It's one thing to have three out of my five children watch humans. It's a whole other thing when one of those three is actively talking and engaging with them." He snarled before finally focusing on Alfred. His father's green eyes absolutely enraged.

Alfred swallowed, unsure of what to say or do.

"Well? Explain yourself! Under what circumstance is this okay?!" His father shook the toy at Alfred.

"How'd you find out?" Alfred finally asked after a few moments.

"It doesn't matter."

'Liam.' Alfred rolled his eyes, it was clear that Liam must have been tailing him. Alfred crossed his arms and turned his head away.

"This is going to stop. Now-" His dad started but honestly at that moment something in Alfred just snapped he was tired of being told what to do.

"No!" Alfred huffed his response and decided enough was enough. "I like Kiku!"

You would have thought Alfred had slapped his father by the shocked expression that came across his face. "I beg your pardon?!"

*"You heard me! I like Kiku! I've been talking to him for years now and it's not going to stop just because **you** said so!" Alfred exploded as he snarled right back at his father.*

"Have you forgotten who you're talking to!?" His dad tightened his grip on the toy and Alfred thought about just snatching it, but he didn't, instead, he stood his ground and possibly dug his grave even deeper.

"I'm tired of this! Just because you have a vendetta against the humans doesn't mean I do! They aren't that bad as you've been making them out to be!"

"I know more than you!"

"Do you?!" Alfred all but screamed at his dad as he clenched his fists so tightly that he was tearing into his own palms with his nails. "Because I don't think you do! You can't possibly know how I feel-"

"-Alfred, enough is enough-"

"-No!"

"Alfred-"

"I like Kiku! Just because you can't get someone to like you the way Kiku likes me-"

"You will not talk to me like that-"

"Just because nobody loves you doesn't mean you should stop me from loving Kiku!"

*Silence. Alfred went too far, he knew it. His father's face turned red and his breathing became heavy. "You think this is love? **This?!**" His father gestured towards the toy. "This is nothing! This is just a toy!" Alfred watched as his father's hand glowed an emerald shade of green and before he knew it, in a blinding green flash, the little dog was nothing more than melted bits of plastic that floated off away from the two of them.*

It crushed Alfred to watch.

"-Plastic and fake." His father opened his palm and any remaining bits of plastic were gone. "Just like this insane delusion you've given yourself. You can forget about the other toys as well, I've already taken the liberty of destroying them before coming to get you."

"..." Alfred narrowed his eyes as a few heavy seconds passed them by. "I..." Alfred gritted his teeth. "I absolutely hate you!" He finally exploded.

"Well get in line behind Peter! You're my son and you're coming home-"

*"No... I'm not..." Alfred backed up a little away from him. This man, there's just no way this man could be his father. What father would ever do this and think it was reasonable and sane? "I am **never** coming back to you... I hope you're happy, Arthur... I really do." And with that Alfred fled.*

"Get back here!" He heard his father maybe try and give chase but not even he could keep up with Alfred at that moment. Alfred made a promise to himself that night, that he would never ever return.

"-You've been quiet." Kiku's voice forced Alfred back to reality. Alfred let out a slow and uneasy breath that he's been holding in. Kiku reached up suddenly and used his hand to touch Alfred's. It was a gentle touch that made Alfred blush a little.

Alfred couldn't hold back his smile as he noticed something. "Is that the shiny rock I gave you?" He ran his thumb over the 'rock' that rested on Kiku's middle finger.

"It's a ring. I guess someone must have lost it in the ocean. It was a little big for any of my other fingers..." Kiku commented as he twirled it with his thumb. "I am not one for jewelry, but I like this ring and will wear it on occasion."

"Hey, Kiku?"

"Hm?"

Alfred wanted to tell him about the collection, about his father, and about why he changed into a human, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. "...I'm glad you liked it." Alfred finally choked out as he looked at the ring. "It looks good on you."

Chapter End Notes

Should I change the tags for what I did to Tino's family?

Uncomfortable revelations

Chapter Notes

Listen up people! I have glasses, so I know how it works with eye-exams and how long it takes to get your frames (two weeks max) now for this story to work I can't have them wait that long for Mattie and Alfred to get their glasses, so I am absolutely cheating in this chapter and I know it. Sorry, as much as I love logic and making things flow naturally I have to make this one thing (IN A STORY ABOUT MERPEOPLE!) Unrealistic.

"Kiku?"

Kiku and Alfred walked into the eye doctor building. It smelt of strong cleaning products and was cold, almost uncomfortably so. Although Alfred wanted to look at the frames his bladder was telling him that he needed to go. Now preferably.

"*Hai*?"

"I'm going to go to the restroom."

"That's fine.."

Alfred made a bee-line for the restroom while Kiku went to work on signing in. He took a seat in the waiting room and filled out what he knew about Alfred but had to leave things blank. In the middle of his writing the doctor's door opened, Kiku didn't bother looking up. He knew the doctor wouldn't be calling him next, not when others were waiting around him.

"Alright, Matthew, why don't you go and pick out your frames? Yeah?" The doctor said and Kiku assumed Matthew went off to do just that in the very next room away from those waiting. Kiku still didn't look up from the papers before him as he continued to write. Kiku only looked up when only seconds later Alfred came back and sat down next to him.

"You don't have a last name, do you?" Kiku asked as he showed the blank space to Alfred.

"Nope."

"Well, it's best if you had one..."

"It's not enough that I just have one name?" Alfred's eyebrow rose as he asked his question. Kiku shook his head and Alfred blew a raspberry in response.

"No, sadly not. It's kind of important to have a last name."

Alfred looked around for a moment, thinking of a suitable last name. "Awesome. Alfred Awesome." Kiku laughed as he gave Alfred a slight shove.

"Be serious."

One would have thought Kiku told Alfred to do something mundane by his bored expression. Alfred looked at the TV, an ad was playing for some sort of coffee brand under the name of 'Caffeine-free Jones.' *"a coffee that'll give you the hype without the dangerous drug!"*

"...Jones." Alfred hummed in thought and Kiku looked at him, now this time he had the raised eyebrow. "I like that. Alfred Jones... it has a nice ring to it."

Kiku thought about it and agreed. "Alfred Jones. I like that." Kiku spoke as he wrote it down. *'It's better than my suggestion of Alfred Smith.'* Kiku thought to himself. "You're right. It does have a nice ring to it."

"I think I like these." Matthew hummed as he showed Máximo the pair of frames. They were square with a gold wire that went underneath them but no wire on top. They were light weight and didn't feel as bulky as the plastic frames.

Máximo looked at them before checking the tag on the side. He then nodded. "Alright, those are covered by the eye exam."

"I'm not gonna lie, I'm excited-" Matthew confessed as he kept in step with Máximo towards the receptionist. "-to see!"

"It's just crazy that you thought it was normal that you couldn't see, *amigo*-" Máximo paused and looked at Matthew before his brow furrowed. "-for a moment I just forgot who I was talking to." Máximo shook his head as he let out a soft chuckle. "Which is good. It means you're learning."

"Find everything, alright?" The receptionist questioned with a smile as they approached the desk.

"*Si*, hey, how much for getting these done today?"

While Máximo talked to the receptionist Matthew looked outside through the giant windows that this place had. It was a beautiful day out, it truly was. Yes, it was a little more on the hotter side, but it wasn't too unbearably so. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky and everyone was out doing their usual mundane things.

Matthew watched the people the best he could, his eyes were still very limited.

"Mr. Alfred Jones?" A voice called out in the waiting room. Matthew raised an eyebrow and looked momentarily, it was too far for him to make out any faces or even defining features, so he waved it off rather quickly. Odds are it wasn't his Alfred anyways.

"Alright," Máximo grunted as he approached Matthew. "It's all paid for. Your glasses should be ready by five pm."

Matthew smiled. "Thank you! You've done so much for me." He almost yelled as they walked out of the building. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"Don't worry about all that. Let's just focus on getting you up to speed with everything alright- oh!" Máximo brought his arm quickly just below Matthew's chest. This was a clear tell sign to stop, so Matthew did. A car slowly passed by the two of them. "Starting with resuming the basics. Look both ways before crossing, even if you're in the parking lot and you have the right away. Look so not to get hit."

"Both ways. Got it!"

"Good."

After five, almost antagonizing hours: Matthew's new glasses were ready and... holy cow.

Máximo couldn't calm Matthew down, he was absolutely beaming and rushing around. "This is so much better!" Matthew couldn't help but announce loud enough to earn him a few chuckles from the other patrons. Matthew gasped once he looked at Máximo. "You have *facial hair*!"

"He seriously couldn't see, huh?" The receptionist, a different person than before, chuckled lowly at Máximo.

"No. He couldn't." Máximo shelled out some bills.

"This is *crazy*!" Matthew yelled in unfiltered excitement as he was now looking outside the large windows, out at the street. He could hear Máximo letting out a low laugh. Matthew grinned as he watched the people outside, he could see them perfectly!

"Alright, alright, calm down there, Mattie." Máximo came up and patted Matthew on the shoulder. "Are you happy now that you can see?"

"I just- ah! I just... I had *no clue* I couldn't see until- until... until- I met you I mean. Thank you. So much." Matthew caught himself just in time. How he wished he could tell the truth more and more every day. If Máximo had any questions or qualms about Matthew's legitimacy he didn't say anything about it or even bring it up. Instead, he just coughed.

"Of course, *amigo*. That's one less thing on the list anyways. Now to find your brothers."

"Yes!... to find my brothers..." Matthew sighed. His days were coming to an end in the human world, he knew it probably wouldn't be too much longer now until his stubborn headed brothers would be found and soon he and them would be back in the ocean. Still, he was going to make the best of this time he had.

"C'mon, 'Liza! If you're mad at me, be mad at *me*, but don't punish the children!" Gilbert yelled over the phone. He had to seclude himself in his room so Ludwig wouldn't hear, but Ludwig was smart and probably knew just what was happening. After all Ludwig was the one to tell Gilbert when he was picked up from school. That Eliza and Rodrich no longer wanted Feliciano coming over this home.

To say Gilbert wasn't happy was an understatement.

"I'm not punishing the children! I just can't trust you!" Elizaveta screamed back at him over the phone and then there was an audible 'click' followed by the dull ring of the dial tone.

"You did *not* just hang up on the awesome me!" Gilbert snarled as he looked at his phone. He had half a mind to ring her back but in the end decided against it so as not to strain their, now fragile, relationship. Gilbert let out a sigh and sat down on the end of his bed.

Of course, Gilbert knew the secret about Feliciano almost drowning last summer would come out. Hell, maybe it's the reason why he made a vow to stay out of it, it was shortly after that did he tell them all to leave him and Ludwig out of their fights. Was it selfish of him? Yes. It was and he knew this.

Of course, he should have told Elizaveta or even Rodrich, but it was the panicked look that Lovino gave him after it had all happened. The way Lovino had let all his guards down and hugged his hysterical brother so tight he almost suffocated him. And the fact that Lovino *pleaded* for advice on what to do next because no doubt the courts would favor Rodrich after hearing about this.

So, Gilbert thought. As stated: He never had to fight for his younger brother the way Lovino had, and he decided on a whim. "...*We won't tell them.*"

Now that was coming back to bite him in the ass, big time. Gilbert laid down on his bed and looked up at the popcorn spackled ceiling. He sighed; for a moment he felt un-awesomely sorry for himself and sorry for Ludwig as well.

Still... This sparked something in Gilbert. Something that made him sit up so suddenly that his head had started to spin. Something that Feliciano had said just yesterday. '*The nice man saved me!*'

But...what if the nice man wasn't trying to save him?

What if the nice man was a bad man who got off on drowning children? Wasn't there a kid that died last year from drowning?

Gilbert couldn't stop himself. He pulled his laptop off of his nightstand, opened it, and let his fingers type away. He typed in his town's name and added 'drowning' at the end. News articles and obituaries started to pop up. Gilbert's eyes started to widen as he found himself reading case after case.

"Holy shit..." "*How the fuck can the police think this is all an accident?*" Gilbert thought once he realized something. Something disturbing.

There was a *pattern* of drownings. The police clearly missed it because well they were all on the beach and clearly if someone were to drown at the beach it'd just be another statistic for the books, right? But this was more than a statistic.

Every year for the past five years a child, just one child, turns up dead on the shoreline from 'accidental' drowning, but here's the weirdest thing. It happened around the same time every year between the start of May and the end of July. A big gap yes, but that's the summer months plain and simple. "...The children are out of school..." Gilbert made the connection quickly.

And it seemed he wasn't the only one to make this connection. The last kid to die, Sven Oxenstierna, his parents were quick to make the connection and claim it wasn't an accident to the police but were waved off and the death was, unfortunately, finalized and the case closed.

This made Gilbert's blood absolutely boil and before he could stop himself and had his phone to his ear.

It rang, once, twice-

"-*Hola?*" Máximo's voice sounded off, if Gilbert had to guess, he had called him in the middle of eating. It seemed true as he heard Máximo swallow down whatever was in his mouth. "Why are you calling me?" Máximo inquired only seconds after.

"Hey-... I..." Gilbert lost his voice for a moment as he looked back at the evidence before him. "I found something interesting..."

"...Kay?"

"Look... I can't believe I'm saying this, but I just... I need your help, Machado."

"Oh?"

"Don't be cocky about it. It's just, I found something interesting. I don't think what happened to Feliciano was exactly...Isolated.

"You're not a cop, Gilbert." Máximo huffed in annoyance.

"Look, can... can you come over?"

"Again?"

"...don't make me say 'please'."

There was a long sigh on the other end of the phone. He could hear Matthew's voice in the background. Gilbert couldn't hear exactly what was said, but he did hear the end which sounded like. "-I'd like to see Gilbert again."

Aw, his little Birdie missed him already.

There was a prolonged sigh on the other end of the line. "Fiiiiine." Máximo caved. "Just because Matthew, for whatever reason, likes to hang out with you."

Gilbert made it a note to thank Matthew later. "Awesome, thank you. I promise I won't waste your time."

"Yeah, yeah." Was all Máximo could say before hanging up.

Gilbert kept his laptop open on his bed and decided that since he knew he had time to spare, he'd go and check on Ludwig and see if maybe Gilbird has come back to see him.

The moment Gilbert stepped out of his room he finds Ludwig sitting at the coffee table, a giant pile of polaroids and other types of photos scattered all over the table. "Luddy?" Gilbert worried for his little brother, the news of Feliciano hit him rather hard. Still, Gilbert prayed Ludwig wasn't destroying those photos.

He wasn't.

Ludwig looked up for a moment before throwing a photo into a neatly stacked pile on the floor. "Whatcha doing there, buddy?" Gilbert questioned as he crouched down. Gilbert could see the giant box where the photos came out of on the floor next to Ludwig. A that sat in closet for years and gathered dust.

"Organizing your photos by years. It's been bugging me." Ludwig huffed like it was the most obvious thing in the whole world. Of course, the years of every photo was written on the back.

"Okay... do you need to talk about something?"

Ludwig paused briefly in his sorting, it only lasted a second before he put the photo down on another pile. He then picked another one up to look at the date. "No." He decided.

"...Okay, buddy." Gilbert ruffled Ludwig's hair. Gilbert gave his little brother the space he clearly wanted. If Ludwig wanted to organize decades worth of photos to distract himself, then let him.

Then there was a soft tapping noise. Gilbert grinned as he turned to the window in the kitchen. There his bright yellow little Gilbird stood perched on the window seal and tapping away at the glass.

Gilbird is a lovely little orange-faced yellow finch. It was clear that Gilbird used to be a pet. In fact, Gilbert was almost 100% sure that Gilbird was the pet of the guy who lived here before.

Whoever lived here before didn't want Gilbird and just threw him outside. Well, Gilbird came back, because of course he would, this was his home! Gilbert tried to shoo him away, but eventually, little Gilbird wormed his way into Gilbert's heart and now he was part of the family.

Gilbird loved to explore and so Gilbert would let him do so, he'd be gone days at a time, but always came back to his nest.

The moment Gilbert opened the window, Gilbird landed on Gilbert's head and tweeted impatiently. "I know, I know!" Gilbert huffed at his annoyed bird. "You're hungry." Gilbert laughed and Gilbird called and sang loudly. Such a demanding little bird.

Gilbert went into the pantry and pulled out his bag of birdseed. Instantly, Gilbird flew up and dive-bombed into the bag face first. His little bird was lost in the birdseed. Gilbert laughed and backed off. He decided to let his little bird eat his fill.

So, Gilbert went back to the living room and sat down on the couch. He watched Ludwig for several minutes, his little brother not once looking up from his project. It was maybe about five or ten minutes later when someone knocked at his door. It was only then did Ludwig look up.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"I am," Gilbert informed his brother as he stood and stretched. He then walked to the door and opened it. Máximo looked annoyed, but Matthew looked happy, pleasantly so, actually. The kind of happy that could easily bounce around and infect the unsuspecting, hell, Gilbert almost started grinning.

"Hey, you got glasses." It clicked for Gilbert only moments later.

"I did!" Matthew was absolutely giddy with excitement as he wiggled in place. Gilbert gave a chuckle and moved to the side to allow them in.

"Why'd you call?" Máximo inquired as he stepped inside Gilbert's apartment.

"Oh?- Ah! Yes!" For a moment Gilbert was so lost in Matthew's happiness and excitement that he almost forgot the whole reason he called Máximo in the first place. "Follow me..." With a simple command Gilbert started to lead Máximo to his bedroom but stopped when Matthew started to follow.

Máximo was the first one to act. "I think he wants to talk to me alone."

"Oh... Okay." Matthew then sat on the couch. "I'll stay here and watch, Ludwig."

Gilbert cringed as Matthew pronounced 'Ludwig' as 'Lewd-wig,' the North American pronunciation. "Right, C'mon, Máxi." Gilbert decided not to complain about it as he had something more important to attend to anyways.

Matthew looked back at the pile of pictures and picked the first one up. "So-" He inspected the picture. He knew the concept of pictures Matthew saw many humans take them on the beach.

The picture he grabbed had Gilbert, looking younger than he was now, and he was standing with two other men. One seemed to be the guy that was with Lovino at the store. Matthew never did get that guy's name, and a third guy.

This new guy was tall, taller than Gilbert. He had wavy shiny blonde hair that was long and put up into a ponytail. He was winking but this still showed that his eye color was lilac. He had a flower in his hand as he stood striking more of a pose than the other two. Matthew flipped it over and saw writing. He frowned, unable to read what was written. "What does this say?" He asked Ludwig.

"Gilbert, Antonio, and Francis. 2014." Ludwig didn't even look up as he was looking at another photo.

"Francis." That name sparked something in Matthew. It sounded familiar, he knew that name, but from where? He found himself staring uncomfortably long at Francis in the photograph.

'I don't know a Francis...' Matthew tried to think about where he heard that name before, then he just shrugged it off. It'll come to him in due time. He could hear Gilbert and Máximo talking, their voices raising only to go quiet moments later.

"So, what are you doing?"

"Organizing Gilbert's photos. I don't know why he just throws all his photos in a box; it drives me crazy." Ludwig put a picture neatly on a stacked pile off to his left not in the pile Matthew was at.

Matthew looked at the picture that was below the first one he grabbed. He looked at the next one and couldn't stop himself from laughing. What was Gilbert wearing? He seemed to be dressed in an article of clothing that made him look like a bird. The two beside him, Antonio and Francis respectfully were also dressed in ridiculous outfits. Antonio was dressed as a lobster, something Matthew knew anywhere, and Francis. Well, he seemed to be dressed as cat the ears gave that away-

But he wasn't wearing any clothes except for a single giant rose that covered his more private parts. This man was hairy! Also, from what Matthew gathered after the two days he's been here nudity was frowned upon by humans.

"Oh my." Matthew couldn't help but gasp out and he put the picture back where it was on the pile along with the first picture he grabbed.

"Yeah, that's uncle Francis for you." Ludwig said like it was no big deal as he put another picture on top of the pile Matthew was at. Matthew just couldn't stop himself from grabbing the photo to look at. He was interested in Gilbert's friends.

It was then that Matthew felt his whole world turn upside down as he stared at the picture before him. His eyes went wide, his hands started to shake, and his blood ran cold. He licked his rapidly drying lips and realized that his heart started to race.

In the picture, to be expected, was Gilbert, Antonio, and Francis-

But it wasn't just the three of them. As hanging off of Francis's arm... was Matthew's father.

Matthew tried to fight the truth at first. There's no way. His father hated and loathed humans with a burning passion, so this was just a person with an unfortunate face, right? RIGHT!?

The longer Matthew looked the more he realized this *was* his father. Those green eyes, and bushy eyebrows were unmistakable. He looked... honestly, happy hanging off of Francis's arm. His eyes were beaming with happiness as he was staring at the camera.

His father wore a pair of black pants, boots that looked easy to slip-on, a bandana with red, white, and blue coloring around his neck, and a zipped up black jacket. He looked so relaxed and not as high strung. At first Matthew felt happy for his father's happiness.

Then came the anger. And it hit Matthew like a semi-truck. "How dare you..." Matthew suddenly growled out loud before he could stop himself. He then stood from his spot accidentally knocking down Ludwig's pile.

"Huh?" Ludwig questioned with a raised eyebrow. He was clearly more concerned with Matthew's behavior than the knocked over pile of pictures. Matthew just couldn't believe his father would do this, he lied to them, to all of them!

"I have to go!" Matthew yelled and next thing he knew he was out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him. Matthew had some serious questions for both Liam and his father alike and dammit he was going to get answers one way or another.

Gilbert led Máximo to his bedroom and shut the door. Máximo frowned once the door shut. "Okay... first the date and now this? I'm beginning to think you have a thing for me." Máximo was joking but when Gilbert didn't chuckle or even tell Máximo to go screw himself he frowned.

With a heavy sigh, Gilbert turned his laptop towards Máximo and gestured towards it. "What do you see?" He asked Máximo and stepped to the side so Máximo could step forward.

Máximo started to read and only a few minutes later he looked at Gilbert.

"Drownings? This isn't anything new."

"Look at all who drowned! Children!"

"Okay, I mean kids aren't the best at swimming, as much as I wish it were preventable-"

Gilbert rolled his eyes and pointed at the screen again. "All of these kids were between the ages of eight and ten years old and they all died in the summer months."

"Gilbert, the kids were out of school, and most of them without their parents!"

"Yeah, but they all almost always showed up a week later-"

"The body was washed out to sea! Of course there's going to be a delay when finding them. I understand your concerns but it's all just a case of drownings."

"But what if it wasn't? What if 'The nice man' Feliciano was yelling about yesterday wasn't nice. What if he tried to drown Feliciano the first time but failed?"

Máximo's mouth turned into a scowl and he sucked in a slow deep breath through his nose. "Alright, elaborate?"

"It's just a thought that came to me; every year for the past five or so years in the summer some poor kid, between the ages of eight and ten years old, goes under. Last year Feliciano was nine. Here's what I remember leading up to his accident. Lovino and I were at the beach waiting for Antonio. Feliciano was just searching for some shells along the shoreline." Gilbert paused to take a breath and it was now that he was starting to realize that his heart was racing.

"Okay." Máximo sat down on the edge of Gilbert's bed and looked over the webpage as Gilbert continued to speak.

"Okay, now this was about a year ago so obviously I don't remember everything perfectly, but I can tell you what I do remember. I was talking to Lovino and I remember it was a long conversation that had my full attention. Then I just had a... a urge to look over towards where Feliciano was. Feli was behind me, I figured Lovino had a good view of him, but he didn't. Feliciano was *gone*. Just up and vanished!"

"Where was Ludwig at this time?" Máximo rubbed his chin in thought. "They're always together so why wasn't he there now?"

Gilbert had to think for a moment. Where was Ludwig at that time? Why wasn't he on the beach with them? Then it hit him "He was sick. That's right, he had the stomach bug so he was taking a nap when I went out to the beach."

"You left your sick brother alone?"

"Oh, sue me." Gilbert rolled his eyes. "He was napping and I wasn't going to be gone for more than ten minutes." Gilbert huffed before he crossed his arms. "But that's why Ludwig wasn't with us. Regardless of all of that... Feliciano was gone, Máxi."

"Okay, Feli was gone. What happened after that?"

"Well, Lovino freaked out as any normal adult would. It wasn't like Feliciano to just jump head first into the sea! The kid can hardly swim as it is."

"Gil. You of all people know that kids are kind of known for throwing out all caution and just doing what they want. If they wanted to cross the street during a five o'clock rush they'll do just that."

Máximo had a point, but he was also missing the main point. "Yes, you're right. *If* Feliciano was three or four years old! Máximo, Feli was nine. He knew better than to go into the ocean, not just that but he didn't have a swim suit on. So there's no reason he'd just jump into the water."

Máximo hummed in thought and looked back at the laptop. "Alright, continue."

"Well... Lovino jumped straight into the water when he realized that Feliciano was gone, but Feliciano came up only seconds after. He was sobbing loudly, screaming about how a nice man had saved him. Lovino grabbed him and we got him back to the surface after that."

Máximo let out a hum. "So you're saying that this nice man might have pulled him into the water to start with?"

"Maybe. It only makes sense to me. He pulled Feliciano down in an attempt to drown him, but panicked and let him go. Feliciano probably didn't know he was grabbed and when he got a look at the 'Nice man' he thought he was being saved."

"Hm."

"He wasn't in his right mind at the time either. He claimed the guy had a fish tail like he was a some sort of... mermaid or something!" Gilbert threw his hands up in the air and sighed.

Máximo pondered on it for a moment and looked over at Gilbert. "Okay, I guess I can kind of see your point-"

"I'm not the only one calling foul play either. This jackass didn't just stop at Feliciano. He got a kid last year, after all, and this kid's parents are saying the same thing I am. That it wasn't an accident. Feliciano got lucky last year and this year! Someone, that guy Matt and I saw probably, is hunting children and only stopping if there's a risk of being caught. He did see me or Matt."

"But- *but* he would have heard Lovino and Elizaveta, as well as me."

"You guys were distracted."

There was a pause. The pause lasted one second, two seconds, three- "...I guess you are bringing some good points... I'd have to do some of my own research it seems and see if maybe I can reopen the cases-"

There was a loud *slam* that echoed through the whole apartment. No doubt it came from the front door. Both Máximo and Gilbert jumped before rushing out of his bedroom. Gilbert was the first out and looked around to see who had entered. Nobody, but they were missing a person.

"Where's Matt?" Máximo questioned as he made big steps towards the door.

"Left." Ludwig grumbled. Gilbert noted that one of Ludwig's piles of photos had been knocked over. "He freaked out after seeing this picture." Ludwig flashed the picture to Gilbert. Gilbert grabbed it and frowned. He didn't have long to think about anything as Máximo went running out after Matthew.

"Shit!" Gilbert growled and followed Máximo, he pocketed the picture for now. "Stay here!" He demanded to Ludwig.

"Okay!" Ludwig yelled back and Gilbert shut the apartment door before quickly stepping down the stairs.

"Matthew!" He heard Máximo yell out clearly none too happy. Gilbert met Máximo at the end of the stairs.

"Where'd he go?" Gilbert asked.

"... I don't know... I'm going to check the beach."

"Good call." Gilbert honestly went to follow Máximo, but stopped when he looked over at Kiku's house. It was one of the few times Kiku had his blinds to his sliding glass door open. He got closer to Kiku's fence and even leaned in to get a better look inside of Kiku's home.

There was Kiku, a basket of fruits and vegetables on his hip while he was talking to, what had to be, Matthew. Gilbert narrowed his eyes as he leaned over the fence now, ignoring the hibiscus tickling his nose.

When did Matthew have time to change his clothes? Matthew had on a t-shirt and khakis when in the apartment but now he was wearing a black button up and blue jeans?

"Hey, Máxi-" Gilbert tried to talk to Máximo but he was gone. Gilbert looked between Kiku's house and the beach.

Gilbert decided to go to the beach.

He got to the beach within seconds. There was Matthew standing by the shoreline. Máximo had him by his collar. Gilbert let out a sigh of relief that he held in and raced up to the duo. "Don't you ever run off like that again!" Máximo snarled.

"Sorry- I just... lost my temper." Matthew explained.

"At a picture?" Gilbert inquired as he showed the picture in question. Matthew crossed his arms and looked rather cross himself as he scowled, yes, scowled at the picture.

"Yes."

"Why?" Máximo let go of Matthew's, now wrinkled, collar and snatched the picture from Gilbert's hand. "It's just a picture."

Matthew sighed and looked away, he then crossed his arms over his chest. He stayed that way for several heartbeats until finally, Matthew broke down and pointed at a person in the photo.

"That's my dad."

Gilbert felt all air leave his lungs and Máximo scowled a deep unsettling scowl. "...Mattie... are you *sure*." Máximo slowly asked.

"I know what my dad looks like, Máximo!" Matthew snapped back.

Gilbert felt his body shift before he knew it he was on his ass in the sand. His eyes now wide and his skin looking clammy. "You have to be mistaken, the math. It just doesn't add up. He was eighteen when... and you..."

Gilbert's words went unheard and unnoticed as Máximo turned the picture around so Matthew could see it again. "If this *is* your father then... things just changed, big time." Máximo spoke slowly and almost scared.

"What do you mean?"

"Mattie... he killed Francis..."

And that's how twice in one day did Matthew's world just flip completely upside down on him.

Memories that can't be forgotten

Words were said and soon people were called. Now the three of them had no choice but to hang out, awkwardly, on the beach while waiting for Mr. Police Chief himself, Ivan.

At first Gilbert was angry- no- beyond angry. He thought he had put all of this behind him, and now he was dragged back into the mess and feelings he thought he'd forgotten about were forced up to the surface. He couldn't believe he had romantic feelings for the '*son*' of the man that murdered one of his best friends.

'*Arthur Kirkland*' Just thinking of that name made Gilbert want to vomit up his lunch.

Then while sitting on a nearby rock, watching Matthew, who was absolutely enraged, throw rock after rock into the ocean. It was then, noting Matthew's own anger did Gilbert really *think* about it. There's no way Matthew could actually be Arthur's son. It made no logic sense . Arthur said he was eighteen in 2014. That was six years ago making Arthur...

Gilbert did the math on his fingers.

Arthur would be twenty-four years old now. There's no way he'd have a son who's now seventeen to eighteen years old. Could Matthew be Arthur's brother? Maybe, but even still they don't look that much alike. Besides, Matthew didn't kill Francis and Gilbert soon realized that his anger was rather misplaced. It was then that Gilbert decided that maybe he should talk to Matthew, learn more about him if possible.

Máximo was keeping his distance as he was on the phone, he's been on that damn thing since the truth came out. Gilbert also figured that Máximo clearly wanted to allow Matthew to let off some steam. Steam, that Gilbert guessed, has been building up for a while.

"-You!...I did *everything* you asked me to!" Matthew snarled under his breath as he kept throwing stone after stone into the water like the ocean had been the one to personally harm him.

"Birdie?" Gilbert was honestly rather reluctant to get Matthew's attention; fearful that those stones will be thrown at him next. Well, maybe he didn't speak loud enough, or maybe Matthew did hear him and just didn't care because he never reacted to Gilbert.

Matthew picked up a shell and chucked it into the ocean. "I can't believe you!" Matthew snarled and spat as he chucked another shell out to the sea.

"M...Matt?" Gilbert tried again, this time daring to grab Matthew's wrist in an attempt to get his attention. It worked. Matthew actually jumped and jerked just a bit and looked at Gilbert with wide eyes. It was like he just realized that Gilbert was still on the beach with him. "Calm down, okay? Let's talk this out-"

"There's nothing to talk about! I've been *lied* to! Again and again and again!" Matthew hissed before picking up a stone and chucking it a good distance.

"So, you didn't know about Francis?"

"No! And at this point I'm..." He dropped his arms and his shoulders and slumped. "I don't even know my own father anymore..."

"... Birdie... this guy... there's no way he's your father. I kinda hate to tell you, but I think you're adopted."

Matthew snorted an indignant snort and put his hands on his hips. "I'm not." he insisted

Gilbert returned Matthew's snort in full. "You're what? Eighteen years old? Yeah, the ages don't match there. Unless he had you when he was six."

Matthew frowned deeply at this and looked ready to retort but then bit back. "It doesn't matter. I just... don't understand... he looked so happy in the picture, why would he..." Matthew looked ready to say something else but like before he held his tongue.

Gilbert felt his lips twitch; that sickly feeling suddenly swarming around in his stomach, his blood turned cold, and he froze. Clearly he was making an uncomfortable face and Matthew backed off.

"I'm sorry. I've been ranting and raving and it was your friend that was killed...." Matthew looked away and grabbed the upper part of his own arm.

"...I... Francis..." Gilbert just couldn't find a place to start and that was the worst part.

The sad thing was he still remembered the night it happened. He wasn't there when *it* happened, and Gilbert hated himself for if he was just a little faster he might have been able to save Francis. Funny how he had issues remembering what happened a year ago, but when it came to Francis's death six years ago he still remembers everything leading up to the discovery.

"I'm doing it tonight." Francis informed Gilbert as he showed off the ring. Gilbert whistled.

"You're serious? You!? I figured you'd be the last to settle down."

"What can I say, mon amie? I love him, plus we've been seeing each other for two years now."

Gilbert chuckled as he pulled a beer out of the fridge. Of course he wasn't old enough to buy. But good thing Francis was four years older than him. "Research says to wait ten years, so you truly know who you're marrying."

"And suddenly the Pizza-boy is a scientist!" Antonio yelled with a laugh from Gilbert's couch. Antonio then sat up and turned so his chest was against the back of the couch and he could look at the other two. "Toss me one, amigo!"

*Gilbert did as asked and Antonio caught it with ease. "Speaking of love. How's your serenade of that **sweet** Vargas boy?" Francis sarcastically teased Antonio. Gilbert watched as Francis put the ring away in his blazer coat.*

Francis was really dressed up for this. He was always a fashionable man, but his outfit was screaming 'I want to look nice because I'm planning on doing something special!'

"Hey, I'm going to wear Lovino down, just you wait! Soon he'll be all over me." Antonio confidently yelled to the two of them.

*"Oh, soon our little Gilbert will be the only one without a special someone!" Francis wrapped an arm around Gilbert's shoulder and pulled him in for a side hug. Francis smelt **strongly** of some sort of pungent french cologne. Gilbert visibly gagged at this.*

"Bah, I don't want anyone." Gilbert wiggled out of Francis's grasp spilling a bit of his beer in the process. "Nobody can handle my awesomeness for too long anyway!"

"I think you mean nobody can stand to be around you for too long." Antonio teased and got off the couch. Gilbert gave him the bird while he took a sip of his beer.

"So, how do you plan to do it? Propose that is?" Gilbert was the one to change the subject rather quickly.

Francis's face absolutely lit up. "Make it a day he can't forget of course! He loves the beach so much that I decided to have a nice picnic by the waves with all of his favorite foods. Then we'll walk along the shoreline just before the sunsets, and then I'll pop the question." Francis grinned. He looked just about as giddy as a schoolgirl getting asked to prom.

"Alright! Sounds like a plan!" Gilbert then snapped his fingers as an idea hit him. "Hey, I live so close to the beach. How about I come around and snap photos? I mean I'm no professional photographer, but still!"

"Oh, that's perfect! Come around right before sun-down." Francis smiled and patted Gilbert on the shoulder.

"Come on. Sit with me, and stop taking your anger out on the ocean." Gilbert grabbed Matthew by both of his hands and led him over towards the boulder he was previously sitting on. Gilbert grabbed Matthew by his hips and hoisted him up on the boulder.

"Oh!" Matthew gasped at that, but it wasn't an angry gasp, just surprised. He then laughed a small little laugh. "Why, thank you." Matthew smiled for just a moment before his smile left and he looked away. "I... I'm sorry." Matthew whispered.

Gilbert jumped up so he was sitting next to Matthew. "It's not your fault. Yeah, at first I was mad, but you didn't kill my friend and it's clear you've been through a lot as well." Gilbert awkwardly scratched at the back of his head.

"I just don't understand. I don't understand anything anymore."

"It seems that's what your dad wanted. To keep you in the dark."

"Maybe..."

The two of them sat in silence. They could hear Máximo yelling in spanish off in the distance, he was not happy. Not at all.

A warm summer breeze swept by the two of them as they sat there. "I made him mad." Matthew sighed and rubbed his collar where Máximo had grabbed him earlier.

"I think he's more mad about your dad than you... but why did you run off to the beach, Birdie?"

Matthew's mouth twitched and he turned his head. For a moment Gilbert wondered if Matthew was going to answer him or not. It was right when Gilbert opened his mouth to change the subject did Matthew answer. "There's a sense of safety for me on the beach."

"Yeah, I hate to be the one to shatter that safety for you, but this place is far from safe. This is where Francis was killed, you know?" Of course Matthew didn't know and telling him that was just a dick move, Gilbert realized as Matthew's face crumbled and his shoulders slumped even farther.

"Of course it was... drowned?"

This time Gilbert hesitated. He had been the first one to discover Francis's body after all.

Gilbert whistled joyfully as he exited his apartment. He twirled the key on one finger as he locked the door. He was a little late, he knew this, but he was sure the two love birds wouldn't mind after all he only lived less than two minutes from the beach.

His old digital camera tucked away safely in his coat pocket. Gilbert held his head high as he passed by his neighbor's garden. He really should get to know the man, but it was obvious his neighbor was a recluse and Gilbert wasn't going to force a relationship.

So, he just kept walking. He couldn't wait to snap these pictures, really, he was happy for Francis.

Why Francis loved Arthur, Gilbert had no clue. Arthur was loud, rude, and often picked fights with Francis. Calling him a 'frog' on more than one occasion.

The sex must be insane if Francis was willing to get down on one knee for Arthur.

Still Gilbert felt happy for Francis, how happy he was and how excited he seemed to be doing this.

Gilbert was lost in his thoughts when an unholy flash of green lit up the whole neighborhood. Gilbert actually stopped dead in his tracks and almost slipped on to his butt. He blinked in confusion for several seconds, his body unable to comprehend what he just witnessed. All it was was just a flash of green light, almost like someone lit a firework. The worlds brightest firework if that was possible.

*Then the reality hit Gilbert that the flash of light came **from the beach**. And Gilbert's stomach sank. He didn't know why exactly, but something told him that something bad had*

just happened. 'Everything is fine.' he tried to tell himself as he continued his stroll down to the beach.

Gilbert started to take his camera out the closer he got. He could just see the shoreline and could hear the waves crash against the beach. When he was close enough he looked up when he noticed that some clouds seemed to roll in and darken the sky to an inky black that made it feel like night had come prematurely.

Goosebumps started to rise on Gilbert's arms and he huddled in on himself in an attempt to get himself warm. It was summer but the temperature was starting to drop, almost impossibly so. The waves were becoming brash and uncontrollable. Gilbert almost felt afraid to get too close in fear of being drifted out to sea.

Still, Gilbert picked up the speed and hurried down to where Francis and Arthur should be, the lovebirds wouldn't be on the beach too much longer if this weather kept up.

Gilbert saw two figures and instantly he brought his camera up before even thinking about it. "Smile!" He called out as he snapped the picture a bright flash erupted from his camera-

His heart sank way down to his knees as his jaw dropped and he lowered the camera.

There Arthur was, yes. Only Arthur was standing over Francis's crumpled body. Arthur's face was tear-stained and red as it was clear he was sobbing. The thing was there was a blood covered knife in Arthur's hands, which were equally bloodied by the look of it. Arthur took one step back and Gilbert gained his senses back once reality had struck him.

"No!" Gilbert dropped the camera and went for Arthur. Arthur, seeing only one way out of this, jumped right into the water, taking the knife with him.

Gilbert paused his chase when a particularly bad wave almost tried to drag him under. "You fucker!" Gilbert roared before turning his attention to Francis.

There Francis laid, eyes open, blank and lifeless as he permanently stared up at the sky. There were so many stab wounds that Gilbert couldn't possibly tell which one did the killing blow. "Francis?" Gilbert still called out like that would bring his friend back to life. Obviously it didn't. "F-Franc-" Gilbert couldn't even say it this time around as his voice died in his throat. Maybe it was the fact that Gilbert saw that Francis still had the proposal ring and box in his right hand.

Arthur had attacked Francis after he had proposed.

Gilbert honestly wished he would have jumped in right after Arthur. He wished he would have grabbed him, dragged him back to shore and beat him within an inch of his damn life. But he didn't. Something told him if he jumped into those dangerous waves he wouldn't have made it back to land.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked." Matthew sighed and Gilbert remembered that Matthew had asked him a question.

"No, no... Francis was... stabbed."

Matthew blinked at that information. He had a look on his face telling Gilbert that he hadn't expected that. "I... I didn't take him as being that brutal."

"If I'm being honest, I didn't think he'd still be alive."

"My dad?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"He jumped into the ocean after I caught him. Those waves were horrible; something out of a movie even. Yet after all these years that bastard survived." Gilbert chewed on the corner of his thumb as he thought about that night.

There was always something unsettling about Arthur's eyes that night. Granted Arthur had the greenest eyes Gilbert had ever seen, but this was different. They didn't look right, he remembered that when he snapped the picture...

Maybe if he looked at it again-

No. He never wanted to see that damned picture again. Never. Of course he had given a copy to the police, but he still had the photo on a flash drive that was probably still in that same camera up in his closet.

Matthew looked out at the ocean and stared hard at the water and the waves coming to and fro.

Silence. That's all that greeted them.

Then. "If you never want to talk to me again... I'd be okay with that." Matthew sighed and let his head hang.

Gilbert didn't answer right away. Instead he looked back out at the waves. He almost felt like Arthur could pop out of those waves any second now, that knife still in his hands. Of course Arthur didn't. "... I thought about it, I won't lie. But, you didn't kill my best friend."

"No, but I'm related to the man who did." Matthew frowned.

Gilbert couldn't stop the soft chuckle from leaving his mouth. Matthew still believed that, huh? Still, Gilbert jumped down from the rock, and started to dust himself off. "Sorry, Birdie, but the awesome me has declared that you are too awesome to let go." Gilbert declared and brought his hands up so he could help lift Matthew off of the rock. Matthew giggled at the tickling sensation of Gilbert's fingers against his sides as he was lifted up before promptly placed back down on the sandy ground of the beach.

"Thanks, Gil." Matthew smiled a sweet little smile.

"Oi!" Máximo came up to the two of them. His cellphone now safely in his pocket. "There's been a change of plans. That was Ivan I was just talking to. He says we have to go back to the station."

Gilbert made a face as the idea of sitting in an interrogation room sprung to his mind. "Does that mean-"

"No. Not you. Just Matthew and I. Go back to your brother." It was an order by the tone and order that Gilbert, for once, was happy to obey.

"Fine." He gave a half-hearted wave goodbye and got ready to leave. In all honesty Gilbert wanted a beer and just to relax and get his mind off of everything that was forced to the surface.

"Bye, Gil." Matthew smiled with his eyes closed before returning to Máximo's side. The two of them making their way down the beach and off towards Máximo's car no doubt. Gilbert watched them go for some time before eventually making his way back to his own home. On his way Gilbert looked over towards Kiku's back door. The blinds pulled and the house now secluded.

Gilbert thought about it for a moment or two before he shrugged it all off. Yeah, that guy looked a lot like Matthew, but dammit, Gilbert was tired and really didn't feel like doing anymore conspiracy hunting. So, he went home.

"You're not in trouble, Matthew." Eduard spoke in a soft tone as they both sat in his office. Matthew chose the couch this time around and because of this Eduard sat at the chair across from Matthew, not at his desk.

Eduard looked rather tired, like he had been woken up to come here, and he probably was. His clothes were put on but rather sloppily by the looks of it as he had missed a button when buttoning up his shirt and now all his buttons were misaligned. His shirt also wasn't tucked in. He wore blue jeans, and easy slip-on shoes. Clearly not exactly professional.

Still, Matthew couldn't stop his frown and he brought his legs up so his knees were against his chest. Matthew then wrapped his arms around his knees. "I kinda feel like it."

"Well, you're not. So don't feel like you've done something wrong." Eduard tried to put Matthew's mind at ease. "I just have to ask a few things, okay?"

"Okay."

Eduard sighed as he took a moment. "Alright... you don't know where you or your dad lives, do you?"

Matthew swallowed a lump that started to form in his throat. "No, sir."

Eduard shook his head and wrote something down. He looked rather disappointed by Matthew's answer but didn't say anything about it. Matthew bit his lip as a nagging feeling

starting to gnaw at his stomach. He felt like he had just said something wrong.

Eduard picked up the paper he was writing on and started reading what was underneath it before he continued to write. He eventually stopped writing and looked at Matthew. "So, I need to ask this question just for the sake of it. What were you doing on May the twenty-sixth in twenty-fourteen."

"Sir, I only *just* learned the concept of months and years." Matthew, rather bluntly, retorted back as he dropped one of his legs down. "So, I'm sorry, but I can't answer that." Eduard made a disgruntled face, but sighed, and wrote it down.

"Okay." Eduard scratched his head with his pen before putting the clipboard down on the table. "If that's the case then I can't really ask anymore questions, then, can I?... Except one." Eduard leaned in, his elbows on his knees and his eyes now focused directly on Matthew and nothing else. "Arthur was eighteen at the time. How is it that you're almost the same age as he was six years ago? Is he *really* your father? Or is he your brother?"

This question again?! It was Matthew that scowled and gave a clear disgruntled face this time around. At first he was going to tell Eduard that: 'Yes, for the love of the all mighty and the sea, Arthur *is* my dad? Why does it matter?!'

But then Matthew thought about it. Clearly the humans are having a hard time grasping the concept because of their ages. Matthew never thought it about it like a human would, in fact he never really thought about Arthur being his father. So, he decided to go about it a different way.

"I'm confused about this." Matthew started out truthfully and he ran his fingers through his hair to get a few strands out of his eyes. "I really don't see why it's such a big deal, but regardless if he was my brother or not, he still raised me and my other siblings respectfully."

Eduard hummed in thought. "I guess you have a point, but that still adds more questions than I'm comfortable with."

Matthew shrugged. "You can ask. I'll answer the best I can."

"Okay... well if he was eighteen then and you're... eighteen now?"

Matthew just nodded, even though the more he thought about it, he didn't know his actual age. Merpeople didn't need to worry about that.

"Okay that would leave a six year difference between you two. Basic math, Matthew. So you're telling me a six year old raised you and your other siblings?"

This was the same thing Gilbert had said earlier as well.

Matthew felt his face twist in confusion. He knew that six year olds were children, obviously! But no, his father has looked the same age for as long as Matthew could remember. "No-" Matthew spoke before he could stop himself. Instantly he shut his mouth, but it was too late by the blink of bewilderment that Eduard was now giving him.

"... I'm confused." Eduard sighed and placed his glasses off of his face so he could rub his tired looking eyes.. "And I'm tired. So, I'm thinking that I must have confused you too much with math." Eduard shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose.

'Change the subject.' Matthew's inner voice commanded and he decided to do just that. "If I may?"

Eduard put his glasses back on his face. He looked a little more hopeful now. "Yes?"

Matthew licked his lips, pausing for just a moment to think on what he wanted to say. "Could I see that picture? Gilbert mentioned he took one and I know you guys might have it."

Eduard's hopeful face fell a little. Still, he straightened himself up before answering. "That's not up to me, that's up to Ivan. I guess, I could see if he's willing to allow it." Eduard stood up abruptly his clipboard in hand. "I'll be back... uh... here." Eduard hands Matthew a coloring book and some crayons that were sitting nearby on a table. "Entertain yourself for a while."

"Suuuure." Matthew sighed and opened the book til he got a blank un-colored page. He waited for Eduard to leave before he snapped the book shut and put the unopened box of crayons on top of them. He really didn't feel like coloring at this exact moment.

"He's lying." Eduard sighed as he handed the clipboard to Ivan. Ivan took it and started to read.

"Holes are forming in his stories." Eduard sat down at the seat across from Ivan. It was just the two of them in his office as Máximo was busy with the sketch artists at the moment. "He told me he lived in the next town over, but Máximo said that Gilbert Beilschmidt and Matthew used to have regular talks on the beach on a daily basis. Said that Matthew would swim in the ocean."

Ivan hummed. "Where did Máximo get that information from? It can't be from Matthew."

"Gilbert told him."

"Hm, Máximo had to be off duty when questioning Gilbert. He shouldn't have done that without my knowledge. I'll have to talk to him about that." Ivan placed the clipboard back down on his desk. "Anything else, I should know?"

"...Well, it's the strangest thing. There's the age gap between Matthew and Arthur."

"Yes, I'm aware of that... do you think it could have been a kidnapping?"

Eduard shook his head. "Honestly? No. For a six-year-old to kidnap and raise not one child but multiple? That's a little far-fetched."

"Good point." Ivan clasped his fingers together and rested his elbows on his desk as he thought for a minute. "This has got to be the strangest case I've ever seen, Dr. Bock."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Matthew is hiding something and I want to know what. Hear me?"

"Yes, sir." Eduard stood and stretched his arms over his head. "Oh, before I forget. Matthew wanted to look at the picture. The one that Gilbert took?"

Ivan gave a half-hearted wave. "Fine, whatever." Ivan dismissed Eduard. "Get Emma to get it out of the evidence room for you." Ivan leaned down to look into one of his cabinet drawers as he pulled it out.

"Thank you." Eduard left shortly after that.

Máximo had many things planned for his day off today: 'Teach Matthew to read.' was at the top of his list in all honesty.

Not: 'pass out pictures the sketch artists finished and give them to every cop in the area. And hang them up on the billboards. And no you're not getting paid for this.'

Still, it's what the boss commanded and so it's what he was doing. "Here." He handed a flier to a fellow cop. "Their names are printed on the bottom." He told the officer in question. It was a big flier with both black and white pictures of the two brothers with their respective descriptions. Of course, some things had to be winged for the youngest brother (weight and height mainly) but as long as the picture was on point it didn't matter.

"Here." Máximo boredly walked to the next person in the bullpen. They took the flier and nodded silently at Máximo. Person by person took the flier from Máximo, some even just threw it in their bins the moment it was taken.

"Andersen." Máximo greeted with a grunt. Andersen blinked for a moment as he looked up from his phone.

Andersen looked rather tired with bags under his eyes. *'probably just on a long shift'*. Máximo thought disinterestedly. "Here. Matthew's brothers. Their names are on the bottom." He says on autopilot as he hands the flier to Andersen.

Andersen took it and looked at it for a second. Máximo had just started to walk away as he turned away from Andersen. "Shit." Andersen whispered just loud enough for Máximo to hear. So, Máximo stopped walking and turned to him with a raised eyebrow.

"Something wrong?" Máximo inquired. Andersen looked from his phone and then back to Máximo.

Andersen looked at him for a moment. Máximo kept his eyebrow raised as the two of them had their weird stare-off that was starting to last for way too long. "...Papercut." Andersen finally says as he looks away and puts his phone down on his desk like he didn't want to look at it anymore.

"Pussy." Máximo finally grunted back in a more playful way; before going back to his job at hand.

A restless night, part one.

Matthew couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned on that couch but the sweet embrace of sleep just wouldn't come to him. After a while Matthew just sat up and rested his back against the couch as the blanket draped over his legs. He brought one leg up on the couch and rested his chin on the knee as his mind reeled.

Máximo had no problems sleeping, his snoring was telling Matthew that fact. Not much was said between them really. By the time they left the police station it was dark and both of them were physically and mentally exhausted from the rollercoaster that was their day. Yet, even though Matthew was exhausted he just couldn't get to sleep. His mind was racing too much.

Eduard was nice enough to let him look at the picture of his dad. There was something *off* about his father in the picture, something that struck Matthew the wrong way, but he didn't know what exactly and that was bugging him. He asked Eduard if he could have the photo. Eduard actually laughed at that question.

"Sorry Matthew, evidence can't be handed out willy-nilly."

Matthew sighed and sat back against the couch and rested his eyes. He was so damn *tired* but his mind wouldn't let him sleep until-

-Until he talked to his father himself. He decided.

But to go back without Alfred and Peter-

'Screw 'em.' Matthew thought briefly. *'This is more important.- but do you think he'll let you back up on the surface if you come back alone?- I need to know! No, you don't, get your brothers and do the right thing! Screw the right thing! Was dad stabbing a man who loved him the right thing?! No, it wasn't!'*

Matthew moved his leg down, grabbed the pillow, and pressed it against his face so he could let out a muffled and confused, scream of frustration. Thankfully, Máximo slept like he was dead (much like Alfred.) so, Matthew was glad he didn't wake his friend.

With a huff of frustration, Matthew tossed the pillow back down on the couch before he flopped face-down into the pillow. He hoped he'd suffocate himself into unconsciousness. Unfortunately, his survival instincts kicked in seconds later and he lifted his head up to breathe in some fresh cold air.

"Okay..." Matthew sighed in defeat as his dry throat was telling him that he needed water. So, he rolled off of the couch and silently went into the kitchen. Yes, he was still learning the human ways of living, and he knew what to do because he saw Máximo do this earlier. He grabbed a glass, one with a handle so he wouldn't drop it, and turned the knob on the sink. Water came gushing out of the faucet. Matthew put his cup under and once it was half-way filled he turned the knob again turning it off.

He took a sip of the water and made a face. The water was hot.

'Amazing that they can regulate the temperature of their water!' The only time Matthew had ever been near hot water (minus the shower he had yesterday) was when he accidentally found a geyser on the ocean floor. He would have lost his hand if Liam hadn't had pulled him away before it erupted.

Matthew took another sip, grimacing again at the warm temperature of the water. He was ready to dump it out and try to lay down again when he heard it.

Tap.

Matthew jerked his head towards the window. There was only one window in the kitchen; it was next to the stove. At first Matthew was going to go to it but then shrugged and mentally slapped himself. It probably wasn't anything worth investigating-

Tap.

Matthew looked back at the window with a raised eyebrow. A bird? Maybe. But it's dark out? Maybe he should get Máximo?

Tap.

Matthew went to the window and pulled the blinds back just a bit. They were on the third floor, as Máximo had told him. So he looked down on the ground.

Imagine his surprise when he saw Gilbert down there with a small rock in his hand. Matthew blinked, rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands and looked down again expecting Gilbert to be gone. Nope. Matthew pulled the blinds back a little more fully and the two locked eyes. Gilbert smiled and that made Matthew smile in return.

Gilbert made a motion with his arms. With his palms facing up, Gilbert moved his hands and arms up.

This left Matthew a little puzzled and he tilted his head in question at Gilbert.

Gilbert frowned, pointed at the window, and made the motion again.

'Oh!' it clicked for Matthew and he grabbed the bottom of the window before opening it with ease. The fresh, sticky, summer night air hit Matthew's face full force. It was honestly a little refreshing.

"I don't know much about things, Gil, but I don't think you're supposed to visit people like this in the dead of night." Matthew grinned as he rested his arms on the base of the window. He made sure to whisper as not to wake Máximo. He had a feeling Máximo wouldn't like this surprise visit.

"I... I couldn't sleep." Gilbert didn't whisper, but he didn't speak at full volume either.

"Join the club." Matthew rolled his eyes. "I'm exhausted but I just can't sleep... how'd you find this place?" The thought suddenly occurred to him as he looked down at Gilbert with a raised eyebrow.

"Bah, I've been over at Máxi's before." Gilbert waved the question off.

"I see. How'd you know I'd be up?"

"Didn't. Took a risk." He grinned a devilish grin at Matthew.

Matthew rested his elbow on the edge of the window; he then rested his head on his open palm. He couldn't help but smile. "And if Máximo would have answered?"

"I would have just kept on walking like I didn't do anything. See?" to show his point, Gilbert lifted the hood of his jacket and put it over his head, and turned around. He would have had plenty of time to do this if he saw Máximo answer, then he'd have to book it. As a cop, no doubt would have yelled or even chased him down for doing such a thing.

Gilbert turned back around and lowered his hood. For a moment the two of them looked at each other and Gilbert smiled. "...Do you want to be bad?" He finally asked.

Matthew frowned. "Describe bad." He ordered.

"Well, you look like you have been doing everything daddy dearest has been ordering you to do without question. Probably for years if I'm truly guessing." Gilbert started.

A chortle left Matthew's mouth and he tried to keep it quiet. "You got that right."

Gilbert's grin grew wide. "And you're doing everything Máximo wants you to do, right?"

Matthew nodded.

"Well, Birdie, I say tonight we do what *you* want to do." Gilbert looked around quickly before focusing back on Matthew.

"What *I* want to do?" Matthew found himself repeating those words softly, but just loud enough for Gilbert to hear.

"Ja-" Gilbert paused and looked at his phone quickly. "It's midnight now. Let's go out for a few hours and have you home by... three? Four? Let's just *relax* and get our minds off of... everything."

That did sound nice, but...

Matthew looked back at Máximo's room. He could still hear Máximo snoring away, blissfully unaware of what was going on. "If I get caught-"

"You won't." Gilbert said it was such confidence that Matthew felt compelled to believe him. "Trust me, Birdie. I've done a lot of sneaking around and I have *never*- okay- *almost never* have gotten caught."

Matthew sucked his teeth and looked back at Gilbert. There was a pleading in Gilbert's eyes. He wanted to get out and do something just as much as Matthew did. Matthew could see it written on his face. So he tapped his fingers against the windowpane in thought before he made up in his mind.. "... give me a few minutes to get dressed."

Gilbert started to beam with pure happiness. "Awesome!"

He's never been this daring before, never ever, and honestly, a part of Matthew felt guilty for doing this to Máximo- but another part of him was absolutely enthralled about doing this. He felt bad and that gave him such a rush that couldn't be mirrored, not even when he would sneak off to talk to Gilbert without his father's knowledge.

Matthew silently threw on a pair of jeans, a red t-shirt, and his socks and shoes. Simple outfit, nothing special.

Máximo never even stirred or woke as he snored away in his bed. Matthew silently slipped out of the apartment with no effort at all. He made sure to be extra quiet, even as he tip-toed down the steps. He still stepped one step at a time so as not to fall. He made it down safe and sound and met Gilbert at the bottom of the stairs.

"Awesome!" Gilbert wrapped an arm around Matthew's shoulders and pulled Matthew in close.

Matthew smelt something on Gilbert. It wasn't cologne, something that Máximo wore to smell nice. No, this smell wasn't nice. It wasn't rancid, but rather... bitter and unpleasant. "We are going to have the night of our lives!" Gilbert exclaimed in such a way that his voice echoed and Matthew tensed up.

"Sh! You're going to get us caught." Matthew silenced Gilbert quickly and looked around frantically.

Gilbert giggled. "C'mon." He started to walk, pulling Matthew along with him as well. Still, Matthew smiled as his heart raced with excitement as they made their way towards Gilbert's car.

"What'da want to do, Birdie?" Gilbert's words seemed to slur together and Gilbert pulled him in closer with his arm.

Matthew thought about it for a moment as he rested his head on Gilbert's shoulder. The weather was hot and sticky from the nearby ocean and it made Matthew sweat. "Well... can you take me dancing? I've always wanted to dance with somebody."

"Dance? Like clubbing? I didn't peg you as the type!" A hearty laugh left Gilbert's mouth.

'What is clubbing?'

"But if that's what you want to do? Then sure! Let's go! I know a place!" Gilbert exclaimed proudly and Matthew's inner question went unanswered.

Gilbert's car wasn't far. Matthew got into the passenger side while Gilbert got in on the driver's side. Matthew buckled himself in as the car roared to life.

It was only minutes after they started driving did Matthew start to realize that something was *off* with Gilbert. Gilbert swerved ever so slightly when he drove, and as he drove with one hand, his other hand had a drink in it. A dark blue can that Matthew assumed was soda.

For Matthew, he figured the town slept at night. Turns out only part of the town slept, while the other part of the town liked to go out and, well, party! Gilbert sloppily pulled into a parking space and finished off his 'soda' throwing the can out of his window. "This place is awesome!" Gilbert loudly proclaimed as he got out of the car.

Matthew's heart was still thumping harshly in his chest, but now it was with a bit more worry than before. His apprehension isn't quelled when he gets out of the car and sees that Gilbert's car is crooked that his bumper is actually in the space next to them.

Still, Matthew hears music, music that was coming from the building in front of them. It was so loud that it made the floor under them thump in rhythm with the beat of the song.

There's a pop and then a soft sizzling sound. Gilbert is then next to Matthew, another 'soda' in his hand. Gilbert took a generous swig of his drink. "Well, C'mon!" Gilbert suddenly grinned and threw his arm around Matthew's shoulder leading him towards the building.

When they approached Matthew noticed a familiar face standing at the door.

"Antonio!" Gilbert greeted his friend. Antonio grinned and the two of them shared a brief hug.

"Gil! What's happening? Why are you here?" Antonio questioned with a raised eyebrow as he then looked at Matthew and his eyebrow went up to his hairline.

"I'm here to give Matthew the night of his life!" Gilbert gave Matthew a playful, if not slightly rough, little shake of the shoulders.

"Uh..." Antonio's smile turned into a frown just like *that*. "Gil... is this kid *legal*? Antonio's voice turned serious just like that.

Gilbert made a 'psh!' noise with his mouth and waved Antonio's question off. "Of course he is! Do you think I'm dumb enough to bring a minor here or even date one?"

'*Minor? Legal?*' Lots of questions started to swarm around Matthew's mind.

"...Gil? Does he have I.D.? You know the rules."

"He's twenty-one! Ain't that right, Birdie?" Matthew frowned as Gilbert slapped him, rather harshly, on the back. It was the frown that gave him away.

"Gil, I can't let him in."

"Bah! Antonio, look... the kid doesn't want to drink. He just wants to dance."

"Gil, if we get hit by the cops tonight-"

"Please? Just this once, Antonio?" Gilbert practically begged. Antonio looked at Matthew, Matthew looked down quickly. He really liked the pattern on his new shoes.

"...He's not drinking?"

"Of course not."

"... Okay, I'll give you guys an hour, in and out, you hear?"

Gilbert grinned and patted Antonio on the shoulder. "You're awesome!" Gilbert took Matthew by his hand and led him into the building.

Matthew thought the music was loud outside? Holy cow! He couldn't even hear his own thoughts over the pounding of the music that vibrated all around him. Instantly he put his hands over his ears and scrunched his eyes shut. "Gil..." Matthew tried his best to get his attention, but Gilbert didn't seem to care as he started to drag Matthew farther into the building. The place was bright as well so bright that it hurt Matthew's eyes as well as his ears.

This is *not* what Matthew meant when he said he wanted to dance. He wanted the soft music he'd hear couples play as they were wrapped into each other. He wanted the soft swaying of legs and hips.

Not *this*.

This place was crowded as well. Matthew was constantly bumping into people. He would have apologized for being rude, but he doubted they would have heard him over the ungodly loud music. This music was messing with his senses.

"Here." Gilbert pushed Matthew into a chair once he found a table. "I'll be back. Just stay here, you look a little high-strung." There was something about that tone that didn't sit well with Matthew. Then again, nothing was sitting well with Matthew right now. The music was grating against Matthew's nerves and he put both hands over his ears again. It helped him. It really did.

Matthew didn't know how long he sat there, but long enough for Gilbert to come back with a couple of drinks. He put a dark brown bubbling drink in front of Matthew. "If anyone asks, it's just soda." Gilbert winked and he raised his own drink- His drink was tiny!

Still, he drank it all in one solid gulp down. Matthew watched Gilbert's whole body shudder almost immediately after.

Matthew looked at his drink. He frowned for a moment, and then cautiously took a sip. At first, it was sweet tasting as the bubbles tickled the roof of his mouth. Then came the bitter burning taste.

"Wh-wha?" Matthew's whole body shuddered at the taste. He felt his eyes start to water as he gagged.

"Shhh... just keep drinking." Gilbert urged as he lifted the drink up for Matthew.

Something was wrong with Gilbert. He really wasn't acting like he usually would. Still, not wanting to upset Gilbert, Matthew continued to drink the drink. At first he took a few cautious sips until he decided '*you know what? Screw it! I'm here to have fun right?*' So, he downed it the way Gilbert had with his own drink. Granted it wasn't one big gulp, but several large gulps. The more he drank the more he tasted the gross burning taste.

"Alright, Birdie!" Gilbert all but cheered the moment Matthew slammed his glass down the table. Matthew gagged and bit back the urge to vomit. Gilbert then slapped Matthew on the back again.

'*You shouldn't have drunk that.*' a little voice inside his mind told him. Matthew frowned and pushed that voice back with a growl. Screw that little voice! Screw his brothers! And screw his father!

"Awesome! I'm going to get you a shot!" Gilbert proclaimed and stood up.

"Awesome! You do that! Also-!" Matthew burped. "-What's a shot?!"

"You'll see!"

"I guess, I will!" Matthew laughed as he felt himself start to loosen up for the first time in a long time.

Gilbert let out a chortle. "Drunk already?" He had asked a question but didn't wait around for an answer. Matthew watched Gilbert disappear into a throng of people. Matthew giggled and his face suddenly started to flush. The longer he sat there the more he started to feel rather blissful. All of his fears questions vanish all at once. He simply didn't care anymore.

'*What's 'drunk'?*' Matthew wondered as he waited for Gilbert to return.

The beat to the music was vibrating through his whole being and soon Matthew started to wiggle side to side as he sat there now growing antsy and wanting to dance.

"Giiiiilll." Matthew whined as minutes continued to tick on by. Gilbert sure was taking his time getting the drinks. Still, Matthew felt blissful if not a little more impatient. Soon, Matthew started to pout. If he could tell time he'd be rather upset right now.

Eventually, Matthew got fed up and stood from the table. He'd find Gilbert himself then. Matthew stumbled just a bit before he was able to straighten himself up and start walking around. He bumped into a couple of people while the music continued to thump so loudly that he couldn't hear himself think. The drink he drank might have helped his senses a little as the music wasn't as grating but it was still loud.

He looked around the best he could but now that he was in the crowd of people, some were dancing while most were talking amongst each other (how?!).

Then it got worse for Matthew when he realized that because of all the people he couldn't see which way he came from or even where the exit was. The air was stifling and hot in the

middle of the crowd. Soon Matthew's new goal became to just find a way out of the crowd.

"Oh, there you are."

That voice wasn't Gilbert's. Matthew turned towards it as a man with Inky black hair and emotionless brown eyes came up to him, two drinks in his hands. The man smiled a little, but he looked uncomfortable. The man paused for a moment to look Matthew up and down before he frowned.

"When did you change clothes?" He seemed generally confused as he stepped up to Matthew and went to hand him a drink. This time Matthew frowned but took the drink regardless.

"Change?" Matthew tugged at his red shirt. He never changed his clothes- also who was this man?!

"It doesn't matter. I won't lie, I'm getting a little uncomfortable with all these people-" Oh! this man was confusing Matthew with someone else!

"I don't know you, sir." Matthew truthfully told the man before giving him his drink back. The man looked confused for just a moment before he suddenly looked past Matthew.

"Oh, I see. I apologize." The man gave a half bow before walking away from Matthew. Matthew didn't both watch the man go. He didn't blame the man for mistaking him for someone else, there were so many people that it wasn't shocking at all. Still, that made Matthew frown and he did give a half-glance behind him where the man had gone. There was only *one* person who looked exactly like Matthew.

there were so many people and faces.

Matthew could see that there was an alarming number of blondes!

"Birdie-" Gilbert's voice made Matthew look forward as Gilbert approached him. The man with the black hair now in the back of his mind. "Decided to dance first? Here, take this." Gilbert pushed a tiny glass in Matthew's hand. "Now to take a shot you just down it in one whole gulp and *don't* hold it in your mouth."

"Okay..." Matthew shrugged; these drinks were weird to him; he never knew there was a wrong way to drink something. Then again he didn't know there was a wrong way to eat something the other day either. So, Gilbert raised his glass and led by demonstration. Matthew watched him pour the shot in his mouth and swallow it down instantly.

Matthew followed his lead.

The shot was spicy and it burned- holy crap! It burned his whole mouth and it burned the whole way down into his stomach, but once it was down and after Matthew's whole body violently shuddered it left a pleasantly sweet, yet still burning, taste in Matthew's mouth.

"Isn't fireball great!" Gilbert grinned a sloppy grin.

"Fireball... oddly fitting." Matthew started to feel a little dizzy as the people in his peripheral vision started to blur.

"C'mon! Let's dance now that you're all loose."

Gilbert grabbed both of Matthew's hands and pulled him in close- like *really* close. So close that Matthew could feel their bodies both touching. "I'll keep it easy. Just move side-to-side, don't move your feet." Gilbert told Matthew after a few seconds.

Matthew does. Matthew squeaks as Gilbert grabs his hips and pulls him in closer. The two move in time together both the same way, swinging like a pendulum. Then Gilbert shocks him by picking him up and twirling him in the air for just a second. Matthew is back on his feet only seconds later. He can't stop his grinning and Matthew throws his arms over Gilbert's shoulders against the sides of his neck as Matthew moved with Gilbert.

"You're doing great, Birdie." Gilbert urges Matthew to continue. Matthew started to sweat before too long the heat combined with the rapid movements; It was inevitable.

Matthew squeals with delight when Gilbert picks him up again. "Gil! That tickles!" He giggled and his words started to slur just slightly. Before too long Gilbert started to become a blur to Matthew, the music was slower but still as loud, Matthew's legs then started to stumble and his knees buckled ever so often. He almost fell once, or was three times? Matthew didn't know.

Matthew fell in love with this feeling. He didn't have a single care in the whole world as long as he was here with Gilbert. Gilbert would leave and come back with more and more drinks. Matthew drank with Gilbert every time. The drinks no longer tasted disgusting to Matthew, in fact they started to taste better with each one! This was great for Matthew.

Soon, Matthew's hair started to stick to his forehead as he sweated even more, he found himself becoming oddly hungry. Still, he was on a cloud with only him and Gilbert as they danced their sloppy little dance.

He started to become a little less coordinated the more time went on however. His legs stumbled more often and he wasn't thinking straight. He remembered at one point he might have actually kissed Gilbert-

Did he?

Matthew couldn't remember. In fact every time he blinked something new was happening and he couldn't keep track of anything anymore.

At one point Matthew actually fell, he didn't remember falling, but he remembered seeing glitter litter his arms and part of his clothes.

'I like glitter, it's shiny, like fish.'

That was the last coherent thought Matthew had for the night.

A restless night, part two.

Hours earlier around eight or nine PM that same night. Before Gilbert took off with Matthew. Lukas was currently getting dinner ready. While Emil sat at the table reading a book needed for a report due that week as Andersen sat across from Emil. Andersen has been quiet. Oddly so.

"Are you sure you're up for Tino and Berwald coming tonight?" Lukas questioned as he stirred his pot. They were having soup. It was cheap and easy to make for the short notice. Tino just sprung it up that they wanted to come over tonight with this new kid of theirs. They haven't adopted him yet, obviously, but they did do the right thing and inform someone in CPS-

At least that's what Andersen said. That CPS had been properly notified, but Lukas's mind telling him that wasn't the case That Andersen being ungodly quiet was a sign of a guilty man? What was he doing? what was he *hiding*?

"Huh?" Emil must have kicked Andersen's leg because Andersen let out a sharp. "Ouch!" after that. "Oh, of course!" He finally answered Lukas.

Lukas 'hmphed' at that answer and he started to add some pepper to the pot of soup. Lukas put the pepper down dipped his spoon into the pot to taste the soup. The flavors came back nice and he went looking for his pot grabbers. "Emil, can you set the table, please?" Lukas asked, but it was more of a demand disguised as a question. Emil let out a heavy sigh, placed his book down on the table, and got up to do so.

Andersen was tapping the table now; pinky, ring-finger, middle-finger, and index finger. A rhythmic tapping, fast, and full of anxiety. Lukas frowned again and with an annoyed sigh of his own. Lukas couldn't take this anymore and slapped the potholders down on the counter top. This was very un-Andersen like and he had enough.

"Andersen." Lukas tapped his roommate's shoulder gaining his attention. "A word." this wasn't disguised as a question. No, this was a demand plain and simple. Andersen complied and got up from the table.

They walked into the laundry room that was just down the hall from the kitchen. Lukas immediately turned the washer on. The Laundry room wasn't much bigger than a walk-in closet, but it was more than enough room for what Lukas needed for now. "Talk." he ordered.

"I don't know what you mean-gak!" Lukas grabbed Andersen's tie and tightened it around his fist.

"Talk. Before I shove this tie in the washer with you still attached to it. What do you know?"

Andersen made an uncomfortable face as Lukas pulled on the tie, bringing Andersen down to his height. Andersen, realizing that he wasn't getting out of Lukas's grip without a fight, just sighed. "T-The kid." Andersen choked out. "I'm pretty sure he's a missing kid." he wheezed.

Lukas let go of the tie and crossed his arms. He glared at Andersen. "You told Tino that kid wasn't missing. You told him that you called CPS for him, but you didn't. Did you?"

Andersen awkwardly rubbed the back of his head.

"Dammit, Andersen!" Lukas threw his hands up. "You don't think they aren't gonna notice when CPS doesn't show up? Or when they go to officially try to foster or adopt him that he's not gonna pop up?" Lukas rolled his eyes. "You have to tell them the truth!"

"I know that. But... it's gonna kill them inside!"

"The boy already has a family."

"..." Andersen huffed and turned his head away. "Does he though? If my information right he ran away because of his abusive father-"

"That's something they need to know! They need to know this, Andersen! You can't keep this a secret. You need to tell them the truth and call CPS for god's sake!" When Andersen didn't respond right away; Lukas puffed his chest out, and poked Andersen's chest sharply. "If you don't tell them. I will!"

Andersen bit the inside of his cheek before turning his head away from Lukas. There was a pause between the two of them before Andersen nodded. "You're right. I know you're right." He defeatedly hung his head. "But... let them have tonight. Please, let me just... talk to Matthew tomorrow. Get some more details about the situation... and then tell them once I'm sure I know everything."

Lukas felt his eyebrows suddenly furrow. "Matthew?" he questioned.

"Yeah, the kid Máximo took in. The, uh, *weirdo*. Emil called him..." Andersen looked at Lukas for a few seconds before noting on Lukas's face as it had shifted from furious to slightly confused. Andersen gave Lukas a strange look. "You don't *know* Matthew, do you?"

"No-" Lukas shook his head, but not before adding. "I mean, I knew *a* Matthew. But that was a long time ago. Besides, Matthew is such a popular name..."

"Good point. You can't go anywhere without running into a Matthew."

"Look, I'm giving you this one night, just don't blow it and if you don't tell them by the end of the week I will. Got it?" Lukas quickly changed the subject back.

"...Right."

There was a knock on the laundry door. Lukas opened it to see Emil. "The table is set- and the soup is over boiling-"

"*Dritt!*" Lukas cursed out before rushing out of the laundry room. Nearly knocking Emil to the ground as he did so.

"Language!" Andersen laughed from behind him. Lukas was tempted to throw him the bird for good measure but decided against it.

He rushed to the steaming, hissing, and bubbling pot of soup; and first turned the burner off. He grabbed the potholders and held them in his hands. He grabbed the pot by its handles and carefully lifted it up and off the burner. All at once the hissing and spitting stopped, but not before a bit of hot soup landed on his index finger.

"Ah! *Dritt*." Lukas cursed and put the pot down on a cold burner. He then carefully put the index finger to his mouth, not just to suck the soup off but to cool it down before a blister could form. It was then did someone knock on the front door.

"I'll get it," Andersen called before he walked past the kitchen and towards the door. Lukas sighed and carefully picked the pot up by its handles a second time. Now the spitting and hissing completely stopped so it was safe to transport it to the kitchen table.

He never did get to do that. Nor did anybody get to eat soup that night.

"Lukas! *Hei*!" Tino enthusiastically greeted him as he, Berwald, and their newest addition walked into the kitchen. Lukas smiled in greeting but the moment his eyes landed on the kid his smile slipped.

A little blond boy, with steel-blue eyes, and big black bushy eyebrows, stared back at him. This boy was dressed up in a sailor outfit that one would call 'adorable.' it was a complete set with a little hat and everything.

Lukas gasped in absolute shock and his hands instinctively dropped the pot of soup on the ground. He ignored the absolutely searing pain in his legs as the scolding hot liquid splashed onto his jeans and through the fabric. He ignored the pain in his arms as some of the soup had splashed up high enough to reach his exposed arms. He was sure the soup even landed on his face.

The only sound he could hear in the kitchen was just the sound of the lid that was on the pot as it clattered and then spun, and spun, and spun until it clattered to a stop. Lukas didn't hear their gasps or exclams of worry. He didn't even pay attention to any of them. No, he just stared at the child. The one that Tino had instinctively pulled in close to shield from the hot food being splayed everywhere.

Thankfully nobody else was in the blast zone, though Berwald did take his glasses off to wipe some soup off of them.

"Lukas!" Andersen rushed to Lukas's side in an instant and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Are you alright!?" Andersen gave Lukas a little shake. "Do I need to call an ambulance?!"

Lukas's voice died in his throat before he could answer.

Instead, he just looked at the kid.

The kid looked back at him and frowned. For a moment there seemed a bit of knowing behind those steel-blue eyes and for a moment the two had the exact same thought: '*I know you. I know you and you should not be here.*'

It was the sound of tiny rasps at his window that woke Ludwig up from his slumber. At first he could only figure it was Gilbird wanting inside and so he flipped over in his bed ready to ignore the bird until morning. When the rasps continued, Ludwig resorted to throwing his pillow over his head to block the sounds out.

"Luuuudy."

Unless Gilbird magically turned into a parrot then that wasn't Gilbird at his window. Ludwig sat up letting the pillow roll off of his face. He knew that voice anywhere and that only added to his ever-growing annoyance.

With a march to his window, he pulled the blinds up and glared at Feliciano. Feliciano wiggled his fingers in greeting. Ludwig let his blinds drop.

"Don't be like that!" He heard Feliciano whine on the other side of the window.

"You better have a good reason to be here at-" Ludwig paused and looked at his alarm clock. "Four twenty-eight in the *morning!*?"

"I'm running away!"

"Well, you're terrible at it."

"Let me iiiinnnnnn. I want to say goodbye before I go!"

Ludwig rolled his eyes and turned back to his window and pulled the blinds up. "Why are you running away? I thought you liked living with Rodrich and Eliza?" Ludwig questioned and he opened his window. Feliciano was quick to climb in at the opening.

Feliciano was wearing a matching PJ shirt and pants combo with little brown cats all over the pants and button-up top. He had his school backpack on his left shoulder as he climbed in. Ludwig noted Feliciano's sneakers were untied.

"I did. But then Rodrich and Eliza told me I had to stop coming here and that upset me, and then Mr. Rodrich sent me to bed without dinner for sassing back to him about it. So, now I'm running away." Feliciano pouted before he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Feli, you can't be serious."

"Dead serious. That and I'm tired of the yelling, of the fighting between them and my brother!"

Well, he did have a point there. Honestly, Ludwig didn't even think about that, obviously, the fighting would get to Feliciano but enough to make him run off? "I don't think you should be running away; I think that'll just cause more problems, and more problems cause more

yelling." Ludwig tried to logically get to Feliciano while he instinctively went to tie Feliciano's laces.

Feliciano pouted before sitting his butt down on Ludwig's bed. "Maybe..." Feliciano chewed on the inside of his cheek. "I don't know... I feel it'll be better if I just disappeared for a while..."

"Oh, don't think like that." Ludwig sat next to Feliciano on the bed.

Feliciano looked unsure about that and Ludwig just sighed. "..."

A few minutes passed as the two boys just looked at the floor beneath their feet. "Well..." Ludwig grabbed on to his upper arm and felt himself blush. "I'd miss you if you'd disappeared..." he managed to spit out.

Feliciano blinked before laughing a soft laugh. "I figured you'd be the happiest to see me go."

"Don't get me wrong, your habits are annoying and I *will* show you how to properly clean! But I don't want to see you go. Why don't you stay the night and think about it."

It seemed that Feliciano was going to answer as he opened his mouth, but before anything could come out; the front door to the apartment *slammed* open making both boys turn their heads. '*It's the cops.*' Ludwig thought as he rushed to his bedroom door. '*It's the cops and they're here to take Feliciano back and arrest me for... uh...being an accomplice?*'

Ludwig poked his head out of his bedroom and blinked in surprise. It wasn't the cops. No.

Gilbert and Matthew both came waltzing into the apartment. Literally. They *waltzed* in hand and hand twirling and spinning through the door. They were absolutely blitzed. They giggled, laughed, and then fell over the coffee table that failed to see. Still giggling and laughing.

'*When did Bruder even leave?!*' Ludwig could only think at that moment. Then a more alarming thought struck him. '*Did he drive here?*' then an *even more* alarming thought struck him. '*Did Bruder **kidnap** Matthew?!*' Ludwig knew that Matthew lived with Máximo and that Matthew had to be seventeen to eighteen years old- also why was Matthew drunk!?

So many questions.

"Hey!" Matthew grinned as he drunkenly pointed at Ludwig. Matthew's glasses were askew on his face and his face was red from all the booze he had undoubtedly been drinking. "It's.... Not Peter! and little Feli!..." Ludwig's name seemed to have escaped Matthew, but Ludwig didn't care about that. "Hi Feli!" Matthew's eyes went wide as a sudden thought had struck him.

Gilbert was passed out on the floor and Ludwig groaned. He hated it when his brother was like this. He hadn't seen Gilbert like this in a long time, granted, but still.

"My brother..." Matthew muttered to himself as he untangled himself from around the coffee table and sat down on the couch. Matthew put his hand to his mouth in thought and Ludwig could see the wheels in Matthew's head spinning.

Ludwig turned and ran towards Gilbert's bedroom to grab a pillow for his brother to rest his head-on.

While he did that he could hear Matthew talking, probably to Feliciano. Really, Ludwig wasn't paying attention as to what was being said as he grabbed a pillow and throw blanket for his brother.

He didn't tune in until he walked back into the living room.

"-do exist! I knew I wasn't crazy!"

"Yes, but you can't tell anybody, Feli. It's a secret. I have to be a secret. Do you understand?" Matthew's words slurred as he grabbed Feliciano's hands into his. Feliciano nodded with wide eyes that seemed to glow with amazement and wonder. Matthew laughed slightly and stood from his spot on the floor.

"Uh.." Matthew then made a disgusted face before he suddenly grabbed on to his stomach and clenched his hand against it tightly. "I don-" He heaved suddenly before gagging audibly.

"Oh no! Bathroom!" Ludwig dropped the blanket and pillow and rushed to Matthew. Feliciano realized what was going on fairly quickly and grabbed Matthew's arm. Matthew gagged again and with the help of both children pushing him urgently to the bathroom he only just made it to the toilet before he upchucked.

Ludwig gagged first because Matthew was gagging, then it was because of the stench of the vomit. He was the first to leave the bathroom.

Matthew let out several deep breaths once his first round of vomit ceased. From the living room, Ludwig could see Matthew's chest heaving up and down frantically with each breath. "God!" Matthew spat into the toilet. "That was-" Matthew gagged again and before he knew it he was vomiting again. Feliciano left the bathroom and shut the door behind him. They could still hear Matthew throwing up through the door.

Ludwig busied himself with his brother now in an attempt to ignore Matthew's retching. "So, you're just going to leave him on the floor?" Feliciano asked as he jumped to the couch and leaned against the armrest.

"I can't very well pick him up, now can I?" Ludwig laughed at the mental image. "But one day I will. I want to be strong!" Ludwig flexed his imaginary muscles. "Like *vater* was!"

Feliciano shook his head. "I don't think I want to be big and muscular like *Nonno*." Feliciano thought about it and scrunched his nose in distaste.

"Well, what about your father? Wasn't he big and strong?"

Feliciano shrugged. "Never knew him, remember?"

"...Right, sorry." He had actually forgotten that Feliciano never knew his biological parents. Lovino knew them though. But according to Feliciano, Lovino: "Doesn't like to talk about it."

If what Gilbert had said was true, then Lovino was there during the car crash that took their parents. Putting that into perspective... then Ludwig could see a little more clearly why Lovino was fighting Rodrich and Eliza tooth and nail for his only living family member back.

Ludwig kept the frown on his face as he threw the blanket over his brother's sleeping form. Ludwig knew a rather selfish thought crossed his mind at that moment, which was: *'I'm glad I don't have to go through all of that.'* He would never express this vocally. He knew it was the wrong thing to think especially now.

Feliciano yawned suddenly making Ludwig look back at his friend. Obviously staying up all night was now taking its toll as Feliciano's head started to droop. When his head dropped he jumped up and rubbed his eyes. "C'mon. Let's go to bed." Ludwig ordered as he walked up to Feliciano.

"Can't... running away. Remember?"

"Run away tomorrow. Sleep now. It's best here than on the street."

Feliciano was too tired to argue with that logic and Ludwig let out a sigh of relief when Feliciano jumped from the couch and went into Ludwig's room to lay down.

Ludwig was about to follow but stopped and looked over at the bathroom door. He should check up on Matthew before he went to bed for the remainder of the night. Matthew had gone quiet. So, Ludwig first knocked. No response. After a few more lame attempts and no answer Ludwig squared himself up. "Matthew? I'm coming in if you don't answer."

No answer.

'Damn it.' the ten-year-old thought in demise. He really didn't want to do this, but he reached up and opened the door. He peeked in; the sharp stench of vomit hit his nose first. Matthew wasn't at the toilet though. Ludwig had to open the door a little more to see where Matthew had gone.

The bathtub. Of all the places, this weirdo chose to sleep, yes, *sleep*, in the bathtub!

There's a lot to unpack with that. But it seemed that Matthew was breathing and alive. So, Ludwig shut the door and turned his heel. Matthew will sober up soon enough.

By the time Ludwig got back to his bedroom Feliciano was already in bed, the blanket up to his neck and his head on the spare pillow. Ludwig sighed, what a night. He rubbed his tired aching eyes.

He crawled into bed, turned out his lamp, and snuggled up close to Feliciano. Feliciano was already snoring. Ludwig watched him sleep for several long seconds. *'I can't let him run away tomorrow... I feel like... I may never see him again if that were to happen... like something bad would happen to him. I'll try and talk him out of it in the morning...'*

At some point in the night/early morning, Gilbert had gotten up from his spot on the floor and limped back into his bedroom. Still slightly drunk he simply kicked his shoes off and just got under the covers and ignored any and all pain in his body. However, after a minute or two he started to feel hot, probably because he had his shirt on. He preferred to be shirtless when in bed. So he took his shirt off and chucked it to the floor.

It wasn't until he felt a weight on his chest did Gilbert crack one eye open. All he saw was blond hair and in his drunken mind his only response was to wrap his arms around Matthew's shoulders bringing him in closer. He felt bare skin and realized that Matthew, like him, had lost the shirt. Matthew muttered something but didn't wake. It sounded like "Shirt smelled. Got it off."

Maybe? Gilbert was still too drunk to think or care about it. So he just rested his head on top of Matthew's. Matthew wrapped his slim arms around Gilbert's torso in response.

"Gil?" Matthew muttered, he was so close that Gilbert could feel Matthew's breath on his chest.

"Yeah?" Gilbert grunted tiredly.

"I think Máximo might find out we snuck off."

Gilbert passed out before he could properly reply.

A restless night, part three

It took hours for Lukas to sneak away from the house. He didn't need a hospital for his burns, yes, he did get burned in multiple places but after Andersen and Emil helped him bandage up and put cream on the particularly bad spots; He was fine. But Andersen wasn't convinced.

Lukas told Andersen again, and again, and again, that he just slipped up and accidentally dropped the pot. Andersen didn't buy it. "You were practically catatonic for seconds."

"I was burned and in shock."

"If you have something you want to tell me, you can. Do you know the kid?"

"No. I don't."

The situation was reversed now. With Lukas being the one with a giant secret while Andersen, a man who's job is to interrogate people, interrogated him.

It was like that for hours. Andersen would give Lukas some space but would come in to check up on him and ask some questions in hopes that he would spill his secret, but Lukas wasn't letting up.

Tino and Berwald kept their space from Lukas; they at least got the hint rather quickly.

After the tenth round of questions from Andersen; Lukas just locked his bedroom door. Lukas could hear them talking to Andersen, he couldn't hear what was being said, but that they were talking about him no doubt.

Lukas had locked his door with Emil still in the room. He knew this and it's what he wanted.

Emil knew Lukas, of course, he did, he was Lukas's little brother after all because when Lukas turned around Emil held out Lukas's favorite jacket. Lukas took it and wrapped it around his shoulders quickly. "Cover for me, yeah?" He asked as he grabbed his phone off of his nightstand and shoved it into his pants pocket.

Emil nodded.

"Good, thank you." Lukas ruffled Emil's silver hair before he exited out of his window. Good thing he lived on the first floor. With a simple pop of the screen, he was out of the house. Lukas kept his jacket wrapped tightly around his shoulders and he debated taking his car but knew that if Andersen saw his car was gone he would be caught.

Lukas paused for a moment when he saw the front door of the house open. He was on the side of the house, obviously, so he simply ducked down and watched as light spilled outside from the front door. "-He seemed really shaken up..." He heard Tino's voice as he was the first to step outside. The kid-Peter- right beside him the whole time. Berwald exited next.

Andersen didn't. No, he stood at the doorway. Lukas could see the outline of his shadow. "Are you sure he's fine?"

Tino put his hands on Peter's shoulders and pulled him in close.

Lukas didn't move from his spot. But he did flip his hood up to hide his blond hair and made sure he stayed low.

"He says he's fine. I just don't understand what caused him to react like that..." Andersen let out a sigh. "I've never seen him act like that before..."

Lukas saw Peter visibly stiffen.

"... Are you sure you don't know him, Peter?" Tino questioned, no doubt feeling Peter stiffen up like a wooden plank.

Peter just shook his head. "No. I have never seen him before."

He watched them go after that. Tino, Berwald, and Peter packed into a car and soon were out of sight. The front door closed and the light was gone.

Lukas sighed in relief once they were all gone. He then started his trek. His destination was a bit far on foot, but he'll manage. Lukas kept his head down as he hunched in on his jacket. He was thankful for it, even though the summer night was hot and sticky; the jacket stopped the goosebumps from rising on his burnt arms and legs.

He kept the hood of his jacket up, his hair would give him away if Andersen got wise and unlocked his door to check up on him, or if Emil couldn't keep the lie up. So, up the hood stayed. On occasion, cars would pass him but wouldn't stop. Either they didn't see him or figured he was dangerous.

Lukas kept on the side of the road, almost off in the grass. Which would prove to be more difficult to walk in as the grass led off to a ditch. One slip of his foot and he'll be in the ditch filled with old beer cans and bottles. He didn't want that, so he kept to the very edge of the road and hoped nobody would hit him.

After about maybe ten or fifteen minutes into his walk, Lukas checked the time on his phone. *11:14 pm* his phone read. God, he wouldn't be getting home till after midnight. But he needed to do this. Even though a big part of him really *didn't* want to do this. At all.

Another car passed, this one honked at him while some drunkard yelled out: "Hey there, cutie!"

Lukas rolled his eyes and just flipped the bird at the drunkard, not that it did any good as the car was long gone by the time he raised his hand. '*Prick.*' Lukas simply thought and dropped his hand. He put both hands into his coat pocket.

Before too long, Lukas could see the lights of the town getting closer. That put him a little more

at ease. A seagull overhead let out a lone 'gaaaaw' before flapping over to the beach for food.

The beach was still a bit of a walk to get to, but at least now that he was getting closer to the town he was gifted with a sidewalk to walk on. He happily jumped to the sidewalk. Where the streetlamps illuminated his way.

He heard the sound of a rock clattering and stopped his walk quickly. Lukas had only just stepped on the sidewalk and there were no rocks around him. So he turned around. He was under a street lamp; when he turned his head the only thing he could see in the darkness of the street was his own shadow. It did kind of piss Lukas off that there were no streetlamps down the street and only on the sidewalks, but there was nothing he could do about that fact.

Lukas frowned a stubborn frown before shrugging it off in the end. He was sure it was probably an animal crossing the street or something similar. So, he continued on. The farther down the sidewalk he got the more he started to smell the saltiness of the ocean. It was a scent that brought a lot of people at ease, but for Lukas it just brought anxiety.

Lukas could hear the waves crashing against the shoreline and he paused his walking for just a moment. Lukas shut his eyes and just listened.

Crash...Crash...Crash...

It was rhythmic. Almost soothing for some people.

Lukas opened his eyes and continued to walk down the sidewalk. Sand started to crunch under his shoes and almost make his shoes lose traction more than once. The entrance to the beach was now right there.

But Lukas found himself pausing at a noise. He turned his head where two homes, one an apartment complex, stood. Lukas watched as someone, an albino man that he was *sure* he met once before, but whose name was escaping him, came stumbling out of his home. An open beer can in his hand, Lukas raised an eyebrow and watched the man chuck it into his neighbor's yard, and then flip off the yard. Soon the man was in his car and off he went.

Lukas only watched the man to make sure he was gone. He didn't need anybody watching him. Once he was sure he was in the clear. The beach had a curfew, nobody allowed in after Ten PM, but their defenses weren't impressive. It was just a waist-high fence that anybody could jump. Which Lukas did with ease.

For Lukas, his heart started to thump rapidly the closer to the waves he got. He stopped just before the shoreline. He wouldn't get any closer. He watched the waves for several seconds.

Crash. Pull in. Crash. Pull in. Crash.

He just hoped the tide wouldn't come in suddenly, or else he'd be in trouble. Lukas leaned down and picked up the first flat stone he could find. '*God, it's been years...*' he thought before he brought the stone to his mouth.

"Arthur," Lukas whispered softly then the magic literally happened. The stone started to glow. It glowed a brilliant shade of cyan. Lukas breathed out an uneasy breath and just looked at the stone. *'I still got it.'* he smiled and with a quick and expert flick of his wrist, he skipped the stone across the water.

It landed once and the same bright cyan color pulsated against the ocean in a ring. The stone skipped again and the same thing happened. On the third skip the stone simply sank. No ring of cyan. This was to be expected. The moment the stone hit the sandy bottom of the sea it was an explosion of cyan. Something that simply couldn't be ignored.

Now, Lukas stood back and waited. He crossed his arms over his chest and took a cautious step back from the shoreline. The tide started to recede and Lukas uncrossed his arms and lowered his hood. *'He's here.'* The air turned electric and Lukas felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up and the goosebumps rose to his skin. He looked up at the sky, the clouds started to roll in, despite the night time Lukas could see a gray tint to them. Rain threatening to fall.

"I never thought I'd hear from you again..." a voice greeted Lukas from the side. Lukas simply looked over his shoulder to see Arthur emerging from the water. It seemed he decided to make himself some legs for this special occasion. Why wouldn't he?

After all he'd want to be face to face when meeting with an old friend.

Lukas turned his head away and took his jacket off. "Cover yourself!" He ordered tossing the jacket to Arthur.

"Fine." Arthur huffed in response and thankfully the jacket was just long enough to cover what it needed to. "But don't expect me to don on anything more than this. I plan on going back to the water. I'm a wanted man on the shore after all."

"I'm aware." Lukas tsked his tongue again.

"Why'd you call me? I figured you were done with the ocean. Found human life to be much more fulfilling and all that- what happened to your arms?" Arthur made note of the bright white gauze that wrapped different parts of Lukas's arms.

"I got burned."

Arthur rolled his eyes like he was told something that just added to his growing annoyance. "Did you just call me because you wanted to be healed? Can't do that yourself anymore?"

"It's not that. Are you aware Peter is on the land?" Lukas questioned as Arthur grabbed one of Lukas's arms. Lukas really only felt a mild annoyance by the dull throb of his burns; he did his best to block them out in all honesty. But when Arthur put his hand on top of one of the burns Lukas hissed at the pressure and watched as Arthur's hand glowed a bright green before the pain was completely gone.

"Of course I'm aware, little twit thought it'd be something cute to do so behind my back."

"You don't think-"

"-He did. I know he did. I told Matthew to get him *and* Alfred back, but so far Matthew went M-I-A. I'm afraid. Trust me, if I could go and drag them back, all three of them back, I would. But one look at me and I'd be arrested." Arthur grumbled.

Lukas noted that all of the pain was gone, not just from his arm but also the ones on his legs as well. Arthur made sure to heal all of Lukas, not just the one spot. Still, Lukas frowned.

"Can you bring Peter back for me? Just toss the little bugger into the ocean; I'd have Liam claim him back in a heartbeat."

Lukas actually laughed. "Sorry, Arthur. But uh, a couple of human friends of mine kind of already made the claim on Peter and I don't think they'd be bringing him to the beach anytime soon regardless."

"Hmph, and why not. He's not theirs to claim. He's my son."

"It's a long story involving their first son... well... drowning." Lukas pushed a button.

Arthur frowned and then crossed his arms. "I see... Lukas... why can't you just *come back*?" Arthur asked the question that Lukas knew was going to pop up.

For a moment both men just stared at each other. "I can't. I've made a life here, a better life for both Emil and I. It's safer here-"

"I disagree, but surely you must be bored with humans by now?"

"Not one bit. I stand by my decision to leave."

"But your magic is wasted with them, you can't even use your magic! With you by my side again, or at least in the ocean again maybe, just maybe Marius will back down-"

"You know he won't. He said it himself."

This time Arthur frowned. "Lukas, please-"

"I said no. Respect that." Lukas spat. "I can't afford to get between you and Marius anymore. I have Emil to take care of."

"You don't think I don't have my own to think of? I lost three of my five! I just want them home."

"If you ask me you should let them stay on the land."

"You're just being biased."

"Maybe I am."

There was a silence between them as they looked away from one another. There was a divide amongst them and it will never be lifted.

"Lukas... please. Peter and Alfred both went to Marius... you know he'll collect his debt in due time. I-" Arthur grabbed Lukas's hand and held it tight.

For a moment Lukas let his guard slip and both their hands started to glow the moment they connected. Arthur's green and Lukas's cyan.

Lukas tsked his tongue quickly when he felt Arthur's magic start to invade his senses and quickly he dropped Arthur's hand and took a step back with his hands up in defense. "-I can't fight Marius, Arthur. This is between you and him."

Arthur growled in anger. "There wouldn't be a fight if you hadn't have left us! Do you know that?! You left and we disintegrated."

"Hey, I'm not the one who cursed Petru!"

"Marius killed Francis!" Arthur's voice actually broke when he screamed that out.

"I know he did, and I told you not to retaliate but you did!"

"He deserved what he got!" Arthur's eyes started to glow a bright shade of green signaling that he was close to attacking if needed. Lukas worked quickly and put a shield between him and Arthur. Just in case. "He knew I'd leave to be with Francis because that's exactly what you did! Well, he got his wish, I'll stay in the ocean if that's what he wants, but he's going to live with what he's done for the rest of his life."

"You punished a child for Marius's mistake, I hope you know that. And now he's giving you a taste of your own medicine. I bet he *waited* for the right moment to strike and take your boys away."

Arthur growled and clenched his fists. "Damn it."

Lukas lowered his shield and snarled before poked Arthur in the chest. "You created a monster, Arthur and now *you're* the one who has to live with that fact."

Arthur turned away, visibly angry and now shaking. "... Goodbye, Lukas." With that Arthur jumped into the ocean. There was a bright unholy flash of green that lit up the beach for just a moment before it vanished.

"Hey! Give me back my jacket-" Lukas's jacket was suddenly flung from the ocean and hit him straight in the face. It wasn't a nice feeling as the soaked jacket actually knocked him off his feet. Lukas quickly tossed the jacket to the sandy beach before any water could get on his legs. "Dammit..." Lukas huffed and stood up.

Lukas was dusting himself off when he felt the hair on the back of his neck start to tingle. '*Behind you!*' Thinking it was Marius, Lukas quickly slashed his arm through the air before he was grabbed. There was a flash of blue light and quickly he tossed whoever was behind him back a few good feet with a powerful wave of magic.

"Ah!"

That wasn't Marius.

Lukas watched in horror as Andersen went flying back and hit the fence. Andersen landed on his back and groaned out pitifully in pain.

"You followed me?" Lukas could only question as he looked at Andersen with wide eyes. "Why?"

"I knew you were hiding something." Andersen groaned. "I saw you through the kitchen window..." Andersen slowly pulled himself up to his feet with the help of the fence. He was breathing heavier and his face winced in pain. Instantly Lukas felt bad for what he had done. He didn't mean to toss Andersen as hard as he did. "I have...*several* questions." Andersen wheezed as he clutched at his ribs.

Lukas watched Andersen try to stand up fully but he cried out and clutched his side all while grimacing in pain. "Andersen-"

"What was that? Like. I know what I saw and all, but I'm still having a hard time believing any of it." Andersen groaned out and leaned in on his rib. "Also, I think you cracked a rib..."

"Let me hea-" Lukas's voice died and he looked away quickly. '*Let me heal you...*' of course, he could heal Andersen, it was a simple cracked rib, hell, he could have healed *himself* earlier. He didn't need Arthur's magic to do that. But he had been so used to keeping his magic at bay for obvious reasons. So even now, when he knew he was caught, he couldn't finish his sentence. "...Just sit down."

With Lukas's help, they both slowly got Andersen to sit down on the sandy ground with his back against the fence.

"Lukas... I think I know the answer, but... are you... *human*?" Andersen looked Lukas dead in the eyes when he asked and Lukas frowned before looking away quickly.

'*You can't lie your way out of this one.*' His mind told him.

"No."

Lukas could feel Andersen's eyebrows furrowing in confusion. "Is Emil... like you?" Andersen's tone was shifting now like he was approaching some sort of dangerous animal. Then again... Lukas did throw him into a fence. So, Andersen had every right to be wary.

"...Yes."

"And you came out of..." Andersen dumbly pointed at the crashing ocean.

Lukas shut his eyes before nodding. "Yes."

"And... I... Lukas..." Andersen was absolutely gobsmacked at this point and couldn't even form a simple sentence. "Again..." Andersen breathed out. "I know what I saw, I know what

I *felt* when you- *you*- sent me flying, but I still can't even." Andersen tried to shift against the fence and cried out in pain when he moved the wrong way.

"...May I?" Lukas sighed. Andersen actually flinched for a moment, but he quickly came to his senses. After all: Lukas was still his friend. So, Andersen relaxed and moved his hand from his rib. Lukas slowly lifted Andersen's shirt up.

There a nasty black bruise had already begun to form right at the base of Andersen's ribs. Gently Lukas touched the bruise. "Ah!" Andersen flinched, making Lukas flinch his hand back. "Your hands are freezing!"

Lukas instantly pursed his lips. "Stop being a baby."

Andersen actually laughed at that.

Lukas put his hand back on Andersen's bruise. Andersen didn't flinch this time around. In fact, Andersen just stared down with piqued interest. Lukas's hand started to glow that familiar cyan color. Lukas focused on the bruise as he could feel his magic swirl around in the palm of his hand and extend to Andersen once it made contact.

Lukas was in control of his magic, obviously, it bent to his will and did his bidding, and so within seconds Andersen's rib was not only healed but when Lukas removed his hand the bruise was gone completely.

"... wow..." Andersen breathed out shakily. As he looked at his newly healed body "That's insane! And you've kept it a secret for... god... how many years?"

"Seven." Lukas shifted so he was now facing forward. Andersen lowered his shirt and soon did the same.

"Seven years... but I've only known you for six." It wasn't a question. Andersen was just pointing out the obvious.

"Yes, that's true. It wasn't until then did I decide to become a human full-time. Up until that point, I was really just dabbling in human culture."

"What made you leave?"

"Politics."

Andersen laughed and waited for Lukas to say 'Just kidding.' but Lukas didn't and Andersen's smile dropped. "There is politics amongst Merpeople?"

"Yes and politics tend to be deadly when it comes to my kind."

"I feel like I might need some context here."

Lukas frowned and then rested his head on Andersen's shoulder. "This... stays between us right? I'm not going to have Tino or Berwald try and chuck me into the ocean tomorrow, am I?"

"Of course. You have my word, nobody else will know about this. Besides, I feel like even if I tell anybody they won't believe me."

Lukas did nod at that. Andersen had a good point. Nobody believed in the supernatural anymore. And, because Lukas knew he could absolutely trust Andersen he spoke:

"Okay then... make sure your ears are clean, Andersen, I'm only going to tell you this story once."

One wild day

Chapter Notes

BRUH! His name was Roderich and not Rodrick?! Was nobody going to tell me this?
Lol. It's been fixed now.

Máximo grunted awake as his cell phone rang in his ear. He slapped his hand down on his phone thinking it was his alarm. Obviously nothing happened. So, he opened his heavy eyes and sat up. Máximo watched as the phone went silent for only a moment before it started ringing again.

It was Emma.

Máximo hardly had time to wipe the sleep from his eyes before he answered. "Yeah?" He asked.

"You up?"

"I am now."

"Good, because we have a situation at the Edelstein's."

"Edelstien... Shit, not them *again*." Máximo groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah, I'm at their home now, and Elizaveta is asking for you, by name. It's bad." Emma explained with a sigh. Máximo could hear her shaking her head on the other side of the line.

"Shit... Well, it'll be forty five minutes at minimum. I have to get Matthew up and dressed and then drop him off at the station-"

"Just leave him."

"Ivan wants him there-"

"-Leave him. Pick him up later. Máximo... Feliciano went missing. This is a little more urgent than Matthew."

"Shit. Fine, give me twenty minutes." Máximo jumped from his bed.

"I'm giving you fifteen." With that Emma hung up.

Máximo tossed his phone on his bed and quickly got dressed into his uniform. He put his utility belt on and made sure everything was properly in place before putting his dreads up in their standard bun.

He then quickly exited his bedroom. He looked over at the back of the couch and got ready to tell Matthew that he was leaving and that he'd be back. But the morning rays were just cracking through the window and he decided to just let Matthew sleep. Matthew will be fine a couple of hours without him there. If he woke then he'd entertain himself for a while. Máximo just hoped that Matthew would stay away from the stove.

It was rather odd though. Before he left he noticed that his front door was unlocked. *'I could have sworn... I don't have time for this.'* He decided and swiftly left his apartment.

It wasn't until he was in his car and halfway down the street did he realize that he forgot to lock his apartment. He didn't have time to go back and figured that Matthew would be fine. He was safe on the couch asleep after all.

Gilbert was the first to wake up that afternoon. He woke feeling an odd weight on his chest then suddenly an arm reached up across his chest and rested on his right shoulder. This stranger was lying face down on Gilbert's chest. Gilbert could feel skin against skin and felt his heart start to sink a little.

'Who?' Gilbert wondered, his mind rather fogged up. He remembered drinking rather early last night, probably around six pm or so. Then he drank all that he had in the fridge... then...

Uh.

Gilbert mentally cringed at his stupidity. This was going to be an awkward conversation. He could feel it. He just hoped he hadn't scarred Ludwig too badly. Gilbert usually wouldn't do one-night-stands, but last night he let all of his guards down and it was rather stupid of him to do so.

Gilbert cracked an eye open to get a peek at who was right on top of him. All he saw was wavy champagne-colored hair and his heart plummeted straight to his knees. "No!" He actually cried out and before he could stop himself he threw himself from the bed. He smashed his elbow into his nightstand by doing this and hissed out in pain.

Gilbert heard Matthew let out a startled snort. Then a groggy, clearly hungover Matthew poked his head over the side of the bed to look at Gilbert. "You okay?" Matthew asked.

"Uh... I..." Gilbert breathed out heavily his heart racing a million miles-per-second. Máximo would no doubt be pounding at his front door any minute now and shoot Gilbert dead. How did this even happen?!

But then a reassuring thought struck Gilbert when he realized that he was still wearing his pants from the night before-

'*Oh, thank god!*' He realized that nothing had happened and that thought was reinforced when Matthew crawled over a little and Gilbert could see that Matthew was also in his pants. That did bring him some relief, still, Matthew *shouldn't* be here. Gilbert rubbed his elbow before standing up slowly. His head spun slightly and he stumbled back a step. "Uh..." Was all Gilbert could muster to say.

"Uh, indeed!" Matthew shoved his head into Gilbert's pillow. "My head is absolutely pounding!" Matthew yelled into the pillow.

"I'll get you some Tylenol, but then we have to get you out of here," Gilbert explained as he ignored his throbbing elbow. Gilbert didn't have a hangover, thank god. But his mind was still foggy and he was trying to remember when he picked Matthew up last night.

Gilbert looked over at his alarm clock to look at the time. A quarter past two pm.

'*Odd... I know Máximo has to get up early for his job... so why hasn't he come kicking my door in?*' Gilbert decided not to question it. If luck was on his side, then so be it.

Gilbert briskly walked out of his room, his elbow no longer throbbing, and made a bee-line for the bathroom. Instantly the sharp rancid smell of vomit hit Gilbert's nose and he scrunched his face in disgust.

He found Matthew's shirt on the floor next to a small pile of vomit.

If Gilbert had to guess, Matthew must have turned away from the toilet or something and threw up on himself and ditched his t-shirt as a result. Gilbert couldn't make Matthew wear his vomit-covered shirt, but he couldn't wait for the shirt to get out of the washer either.

'*I'll just lend him one of mine.*' Gilbert decided as he kicked the red shirt into the corner of the bathroom for now. He opened his medicine cabinet hidden in the mirror and pulled out the Tylenol.

He opened the cap and pulled out two, capped it back, and put it back in the mirror. From there he walked out of the bathroom and went back into his bedroom.

"Here." Gilbert tapped Matthew on the shoulder. Matthew looked at Gilbert, before shutting his eyes tight and groaning.

"Make the light go away..." He whined.

"I wish I could." Gilbert laughed. "But these will help with your headache."

"..." With a lot of effort on his part, Matthew grabbed the Tylenol and looked at Gilbert questioningly. "What do I do with them?"

"Swallow 'em. Here." He snatched an old water bottle off of his nightstand and handed it to Matthew. "Pop them in your mouth." Matthew did as he was told. "Take a swig, and swallow."

'*Please don't gag.*' Gilbert thought as he handed the bottle to Matthew.

He did just as he was told and swallowed both pills down with ease. Then he blankly stared at the blanket. "...I still have a headache." He finally said after a few minutes.

"Well duh, it's not instant. You gotta wait like a half-hour." Gilbert couldn't help but laugh. "C'mon. You shouldn't take that on an empty stomach-"

"If I eat anything I'll throw-up."

Gilbert grabbed Matthew's hand and helped him out of the bed. Matthew clearly didn't want to leave the warm sanctuary of blankets and pillows but he stood up regardless.

"You only feel like that because you have nothing in your stomach. You have to eat something, trust me. I've had many *many* hangovers-" Gilbert threw on a random T-shirt. "Just eat a piece of toast, or else you'll feel worse with those pills." He then tossed a shirt to Matthew. "Also wear that."

Matthew didn't protest and slowly put the shirt on.

"C'mon, we should be quick." Gilbert urged Matthew to move a little faster. Of course he's been on the receiving end of a hangover and knew that nobody wanted to go fast while feeling like they've been struck by a semi-truck. Still, Gilbert wanted to live to see tomorrow.

So, he popped some bread in the toaster and went to get a glass of water for himself and one for Matthew.

He turned the tap on and- nothing came out.

Oh right, he didn't pay his water bill.

"Kool-aid it is then." Gilbert huffed and turned the tap off. He opened the fridge and pulled out the pitcher of Kool-aid. He then poured himself and Matthew a glass of bright purple juice.

Was it actually juice?

Gilbert didn't ponder on the question for too long as the toast popped up. He gave Matthew his glass and grabbed the toast from the toaster. Matthew sucked down the Kool-aid without a second thought.

Gilbert didn't bother buttering the toast, he just gave a piece to Matthew, who hesitantly bit into it. Matthew looked like he didn't exactly enjoy the taste of plain toast. Probably because his stomach was flipping around like a carnival ride. Still, Matthew ate slowly and tentatively so as not to disrupt his now delicate stomach.

Still, eventually, maybe five minutes later (though it felt like five hours) Matthew finished his toast and wiped the crumbs off of the corner of his mouth. "Thank you... I do feel a little better."

"That's good." Gilbert stood quickly and so did Matthew. They located their shoes and out the door, they went.

The drive was quiet. Oddly quiet. Matthew had his head up against the window and his eyes were closed. His hangover was still going strong. Meanwhile, Gilbert was still trying to piece together the pieces of last night.

He was starting to remember bits. He remembered picking Matthew up from Máximo's apartment. He remembered the club, but everything else was still so fuzzy. Gilbert gave Matthew another concerned look. *'At least I didn't do anything I would have regretted...'* Gilbert thought with a sigh of relief. It probably would have destroyed his and Matthew's relationship.

Still, that didn't mean that everything was roses and kittens either.

Gilbert still felt awkward that it almost went that far. Of course before he had obvious romantic feelings for Matthew, but Máximo had a point. Matthew wasn't normal and it would have been super easy to take advantage of that fact.

"Gil?" Matthew asked suddenly; shaking Gilbert out of his thoughts.

"Ja?"

"I had fun last night."

"Oh, well... I'm glad."

"... That's not what I meant when I said I wanted to dance; however." Gilbert's mind reeled for a second as he took in what Matthew had just told him. There was a second of silence, then two, then three, then- "I wanted to dance like I've seen couples do on the beach. The slow swaying music and dancing in each other's arms. I don't know much about 'clubbing' as you put it, but that dancing is a lot faster." Matthew finally explained.

Gilbert blinked for a minute. *'Is that why I took him to the club? Huh.'*

"Oh. I'm sorry." Gilbert stiffly apologized. "I... I was drunk when I picked you up, Birdie."

"I see."

Another bit of silence as Gilbert continued to drive down the road. It wasn't until he stopped at a red light did Matthew speak again. "I..." Matthew blinked like he remembered something. "I think I told Feliciano something I shouldn't have last night." Matthew suddenly had this look of horror on his face.

Gilbert's interest was rather piqued for a second. He wanted to know what Matthew told Feliciano, but then he felt his brow furrow. "Feliciano wasn't at my house last night."

"But he was. I remember that much."

Gilbert frowned and then tightened his grip on his steering wheel. "Maybe it was just the booze making you think that?"

"Booze?"

"The drinks?" That's right. Gilbert had lied and given Matthew booze against Antonio's wishes. "You were drunk, right?" He did remember a drunk Matthew laughing at everything Gilbert had said.

Then he had a vivid memory suddenly strike him.

"That's not what I meant, you know?" Matthew laughed as the two of them exited Gilbert's sloppily parked car. Matthew stumbled over his own two feet, but Gilbert caught his arm in the nick of time.

"What?" Gilbert questioned.

"When I said I wanted to dance. I meant I wanted to dance like this!" Matthew drunkenly grabbed both of Gilbert's hands and pulled him in tight. Soon, they were chest and chest. Then they danced. It was a very uncoordinated dance. They both stumbled and stepped on each other's feet.

"Oh! Like this!" Gilbert loudly laughed a barking laugh as he started to twirl around. He nearly slipped and fell on his driveway. Matthew just chortled and moved with Gilbert as they made wide circles together. Gilbert grinned and started to spin a bit more as he made his way towards the front door of his apartment.

"Yes, but slower! Wee!" Gilbert picked Matthew up by the hips, almost dropped him, before making a wide arch with Matthew in the air. He placed Matthew back on the ground and together they continued to giggle and laugh as they danced their way to the front door.

There was a booming honk coming from behind Gilbert. The impatient driver behind him yelled out his window "Go! You asshat!" The impatient man roared and Gilbert realized the light had turned green. He started to drive down the road again.

"I hope I don't sound ungrateful." Matthew breathed out as he tucked a piece of hair behind his ear. "Because I'm not, but maybe next time we go out again... we can dance that way?"

Gilbert frowned at the question. He then tensed up. *'It was way too close this time. This almost ended in disaster.'* "Uh, birdie... I don't think there will be a 'next time'." He decided to say.

Matthew looked away. "I see." his voice became soft. If Matthew weren't sitting right next to him, then Gilbert wouldn't have heard him at all. Gilbert couldn't help but feel bad at the disappointed tone.

The rest of the car ride was in silence. Awkward, awkward silence.

Soon they arrived at Máximo's apartment. His little Birdie didn't leave the car right away. No, he stayed sitting for a few seconds. "...Can... we not mention this to Máximo?" Gilbert asked Matthew.

"Thanks for taking me out, Gilbert." With that simple sentence, Matthew got out of the car.

'Gilbert- not Gil- Gilbert.' Gilbert sighed in defeat as he watched Matthew go out of his line of sight. "Great going, Gil. Real fucking awesome..." He scolded himself, but what's done is done.

So, with a heavy heart, Gilbert pulled out of the parking lot and drove on home.

Still, Gilbert wanted nothing more than to rush to Matthew and take him dancing. The real dancing that Matthew so desperately wanted to do.

'It was stupid to think he'd really want anything to do with me.' Matthew thought to himself as he walked into Máximo's apartment. There was no Máximo there to greet/ or yell at him. Matthew found this odd. He did a quick sweep of the place and realized that Máximo must have gone out to look for him; he felt guilt start to bubble in the pit of his stomach. He had snuck out and no doubt worried Máximo in the process. This wasn't the same as with his father. This was different.

A part of Matthew wanted to go back out there and find Máximo... but another part of Matthew wanted to shower and go back to bed. He decided that that was the more logical way to go; after all, he didn't know the way to the police station.

So, Matthew grabbed some fresh clothes, it was at this point that his headache was starting to dull to a more sensible throb. A shower might be what he needed to get that headache to go away completely.

Matthew walked into the bathroom, shut the door, stripped out of his clothes, and paused. He just realized that Máximo would know that this shirt wasn't his. It was Gilberts and black, none of Matthew's shirts was that color. So, he just balled the shirt up and hid it with the pants and tossed them into the hamper, the way Máximo had shown him.

Into the shower, he went. It took him a minute to figure out how to get it running properly, then another minute figuring out how to make the water warm. Not hot, just warm. It soothed his sore muscles and helped calm his headache. He didn't even really wash up. He half-heartedly washed his body to get the glitter off.

It was at that point he decided he didn't like glitter any more. As it didn't want to get off of his body.

He tried to wash his hair but just couldn't muster the strength or energy to do so. It wasn't until the water started to turn cold did Matthew decide to leave the shower. His body shivered and goosebumps rose on his arms and legs. He dried off with a towel and shivered the whole time he wiggled into his clothes. Eventually, his temperature started to regulate once he got his shirt on.

He was ready to throw himself onto the couch and take a well-needed nap. He just wanted to forget all about last night and the fact that he apparently did something to upset Gilbert during that time. He wanted to forget about the guilt that twisted and turned in his stomach. Even if it were for only thirty minutes.

By the time Máximo got to Rodrich's and Elizaveta's home four other officers had already beat him to the scene and were doing a sweep of the place.

And it seemed so was Iryna. She was standing before Rodrich looking rather unimpressed. As she asked him questions.

Máximo wanted to talk to her first. He didn't know she was also Feliciano's caseworker. But unfortunately, he got swept up in everything and never got a chance to talk to her.

It wasn't until late noon did he finally get a chance to talk to Elizaveta and get the information he needed. Some cops left in an attempt to find Feliciano. While others stayed just because they were nosey.

Máximo groaned as he rubbed the back of his neck. A migraine was starting to form he could feel the pain and when popping his neck didn't help he took two pills. He didn't need a headache right about now. He rubbed his temples and just sighed as he looked at a worried Elizaveta. He came per her request and that meant he had the honor of being the one to interrogate her while Emma was interrogating the neighbors.

Things really didn't help when Lovino showed up. Emma had been the one to call and inform him. Apparently, Lovino was at work and it showed with his outfit. Black slacks, white shirt, and A black apron. His little name tag showed a happy looking stack of pancakes that said *'Thank you for choosing the pancake house, my name is- **Lovino**'*.

Lovino was pissed. Máximo had seen Lovino mad before, but never to this degree. His face was red with anger as he stormed up to Roderich first. Máximo and another officer both had to grab and force Lovino off of Roderich before it got bloody.

"Calm down!" Máximo had to harshly toss Lovino to the ground. When he tried to jump back up, Máximo put his hand on his taser. "Don't be dumb." Máximo threatened with three simple words. Lovino got the hint fairly quickly.

"... Where's my brother!? Has nobody found him yet?!" Lovino snarled from his spot on the floor.

"No, we have officers looking into it. Do you know where he might have gone?"

Lovino didn't even need a second to think about it. "Have you tried Gil's?"

Máximo opened his mouth but then quickly shut it. "Son of a bitch..." He muttered while he scratched his chin. Funny how the most obvious answers are often the ones right in front of you.

But then he didn't have time to truly think about it. As moments later Emma came into the room. "I just got a call." She said as he put her hands on her hips. At this point, Máximo had allowed Lovino to finally stand up.

"Yeah? He's been found?" Máximo was hopeful that this would all end in the next thirty minutes. But he knew, deep down he knew. As a cop never to be hopeful.

"I wish. Gilbert Beilschmidt just called in. His is also brother missing."

"*Mierda*." Máximo couldn't help but curse out. Of course, it wouldn't be that simple, now would it?

Máximo was getting rather tired of driving up to Gilbert's house. He pulled into the driveway in his squad car. Emma was sitting in the passenger seat. "What a shit show." She grumbled but then quickly left the vehicle.

Máximo gave Elizaveta and Lovino strict instructions to go/stay home and let the cops deal with this. It was clear that they both wanted to question Gilbert. It was undoubtedly the exact same question that Máximo also had: Why did it take him so long to notice that Ludwig was missing?

Or better yet: How did he miss Feliciano?

Gilbert was sitting on the stoop of his apartment. He had one elbow resting on his knee while the hand cradled his head.

Emma approached him first. She cleared her throat catching his attention. Gilbert looked at her, then behind her where Máximo was starting to approach. Gilbert's face twisted for a moment. It looked almost like '*Not you. Not now.*' but he quickly stifled the look down and focused solely on Emma.

"When did you notice your brother was missing?" Máximo heard Emma's question. Máximo stayed professional as he silently stood and watched Gilbert's face.

"...A half-hour ago," Gilbert responded as he stayed on that stoop. He didn't even bother to stand.

"You just noticed then?"

"I thought he was at school."

Máximo watched Gilbert's eyes intently. He looked at his face for any telltale signs of lying. "You didn't take him to school?" Máximo asked next before he could stop his mouth.

"...No."

"Why?"

Gilbert tensed a little and his mouth curled into a frown and he didn't speak. He didn't speak for way too long and Máximo didn't like it. It was a grand total of thirty seconds before Gilbert finally spoke. "I... I got drunk last night. Okay? I didn't wake up till almost two." Gilbert guiltily explained as he put a hand to his head and twisted his fingers around his hair. "I thought Kiku had taken him to school... he'll do that sometimes." Gilbert practically whispered.

'So that explains it.'

"Okay then... " Emma sighed. "Do you know if Feliciano came by last night?"

Gilbert blinked and looked up for the first time. "Feli?"

"Yes, he's missing as well," Emma informed him.

Gilbert's hand tightened on his hair. He numbly shook his head- "Ma... no. I never personally saw Feliciano."

Máximo narrowed his eyes. Gilbert was going to say something there. *'But what?... Ma? Mom? No, his parents are dead... my name? Why?... Matthew?'* He thought about it for a solid minute or two while Emma continued to question Gilbert. *'Don't be silly, Máximo.'* He told himself with a headshake.

"Any idea where they could be?" Emma's question brought Máximo back to reality. Máximo put both hands on his belt as he waited for Gilbert's answer.

"No. I don't even know why Ludwig would leave, this isn't like him."

"Think, Gilbert." Máximo hissed slightly. "Think past the hangover."

"I'm not the one with the hangover." Gilbert shot back. For a moment his eyes went wide and he shook his head. "Forget it..." He waved his statement off and he thought.

Máximo did forget about it. It wasn't important. But the wording was rather off. *'I'm not the one with the hangover.'* almost like a taunt a kid would make, but not at the same time. Like he was truly just stating the obvious. Máximo could only shrug it off, it wasn't important.

Gilbert shut his eyes before they snapped open. "The beach." He breathed out before standing up. "Feliciano loves the beach- The beach! Máximo! They're in danger!"

Emma blinked in confusion. "What-" But Gilbert went off towards the direction of the beach. Máximo scowled for only a moment and looked at Emma.

"I'll explain later." He told his partner before he took off after Gilbert. Máximo could practically hear Emma rolling her eyes in irritation before following behind him. Gilbert was ahead of them but they caught up with him the moment he made it to the beach as Gilbert paused and looked left then right frantically.

"Gilbert, the beach is massive. There's no way we can track them down with just the three of us." Emma told Gilbert in a soft tone.

"They're in danger!"

"How so? Do they not know how to swim?"

"No. Emma. It's a bit of a long story." Máximo sighed out as he scratched his head. A part of him told him that Gilbert had every right to be worried, but another part of him, his more logical part, was telling him that Gilbert was blowing this whole thing out of the water. Really, Máximo didn't know which part of his brain to listen to at this moment.

Máximo frowned as he looked at a clearly distraught Gilbert. *'Idiot shouldn't have gotten drunk last night. This never would have happened.'* Máximo thought for a moment before he became just a little more sympathetic. Of course, it wasn't all Gilbert's fault. Obviously learning about Matthew being Arthur's son awoke something in Gilbert.

Still, who gets blitzed on a Thursday night?

"Call in a search team, Emma." Máximo finally decided. "Get Andersen and... Vash."

"You sure you want Vash?" Emma asked with a raised eyebrow. "You know how gun happy he is-"

"Yes, and any other available officers. Gilbert! You up for some walking?" Máximo asked. "I'm willing to walk the shore with you while Emma goes out."

Gilbert's mouth twitched a little but realizing he was out of options he just nodded in the end. "Fine."

"C'mon then." So with two words the two of them started down the beach. It was unspoken that they go down the left. Maybe because it was closer to the town and it'd be more reasonable to assume the children would be that way.

So they walked. Máximo stayed on alert and made sure to look around for little footprints that might give away where they went. If they even came to the beach to start with that was. Máximo was having doubts about that claim, but he'd be stupid to not even attempt to scope out the beach.

Gilbert didn't speak as he looked around frantically. He looked... almost uncharacteristic from this angle. Máximo then realized that of course, he was seeing a side of Gilbert that was usually hidden away under an obnoxious smile or loud proclamations of his 'awesomeness' usually followed by an equally obnoxious laugh. But this... this wasn't any of that.

It was almost surreal to be witnessing as Máximo just quietly observed.

Máximo was a hundred percent sure that Gilbert was having an absolute panic attack on the inside though.

"... So." Máximo was the one to finally break the silence as they continued to walk. Gilbert tensed suddenly and Máximo frowned at that. "Why would Ludwig leave anyway?"

Gilbert took a moment to answer. "... I don't know. We didn't get into any sort of fight. So that rules that out. The only thing I can think of is if maybe Feliciano was there last night... then Ludwig took off with him."

"Okay, but why? They're friends. I get that. But why leave you?"

Gilbert put his hand to his chin as he thought about it. "I can only think of two reasons. One: Feli talked him into it. Which doesn't sound too far fetched as Feliciano can be a smooth-talker..."

"But?"

"But Ludwig is more logical than that. So, that leaves option number two: He's only following to make sure Feliciano is safe."

Máximo hummed in thought. "That does sound plausible. If not reckless regardless... then again, I forgot who Ludwig was related to for a second."

Gilbert actually laughed at Máximo's lame joke. "Whatever-Hey, what's that?" Gilbert spotted something laying on the sands of the beach just little ways in front of them. Máximo narrowed his eyes. It looked like some sort of animal.

Gilbert picked his pace up to a slight jog. He was the first to it.

Máximo wasn't far behind Gilbert and he frowned. It wasn't an animal per-say, rather it was a stuffed animal. A little stuffed cat to be more specific. It was brown in color.

"I knew it. They're here... or they were anyways." Gilbert frantically looked around like he was expecting the kids to pop out at any minute.

"How can you be sure?"

"It's Pookie! Feliciano's stuffed cat... can I?" Gilbert motioned showing he wanted to pick it up. Máximo thought about it before nodding.

Gilbert picked it up and pulled on the inside of one of its ear. Sure enough on the inside written with a black marker read the name **Pookie**. "He must have dropped it..." Gilbert grumbled.

Máximo frowned a little and started to look around for any more signs of the children. There were none. Gilbert swallowed hard as he looked out at the ocean. Obviously the kids weren't visible from there either. Máximo felt his gaze shift to the ocean as well.

The waves lazily crashed on the shore in a rhythmic, almost soothing, pattern. But aside from that, there was nothing of note. Gilbert held on to Pookie tightly as if it was the magically key to finding the kids.

And in an odd way. It actually turned out to be just that.

After that they decided to head back, inform the others of where Pookie had been found and continued on the search. But as they walked back a little voice called out from behind them.

"*Bruder!*" Ludwig had been the one to call out to them.

Gilbert nearly fell over himself trying to turn around while Máximo almost gave himself whiplash. Máximo couldn't even attempt to keep up with Gilbert. Within milliseconds Gilbert as Ludwig in his arms in a joyous hug. "Don't you ever, *ever* do that again!" Gilbert yelled out as he held Ludwig tightly in his arms. "You scared me half to death!"

"I can't breathe!" Ludwig protested.

"Good! You punk!" Gilbert cried.

Máximo narrowed his eyes and stood at attention with his hand on his taser as a man came strolling down the beach.

He was tall, taller than Gilbert. With fair skin and he had light brown hair that was covered with a little red hat that sat on the side of his head. His eyes were actually red in color. '*Contacts*' Máximo decided on the fly. Yeah, Gilbert had naturally red eyes, but he was an albino. The man wore a giant red overcoat that stopped just below his knees. Black pants and black boots to match. This man had Feliciano's hand in his and that was the sole reason Máximo had put a hand on his taser.

Gilbert looked back and noticed this as well.

"Pookie!" Feliciano, clearly not understanding the situation, took his hand out of the strangers and ran up to Gilbert. "You found him!"

"Who are you?" Gilbert growled ignoring Feliciano as he took back Pookie. Big brother mode activated as he grabbed both kids into his arms. Clearly trying to shield them from this man.

The stranger smiled. "I found these two strolling the beach and just thought I'd lead them home. It's not safe on the beach these days."

Gilbert narrowed his eyes.

Máximo cleared his throat. "Well, I must thank you. We've been looking for these two." Máximo approached the man and put himself between him and Gilbert. "Officer Machado." Máximo extended a hand for a handshake.

This man didn't even hesitate as he took Máximo's hand into his and smiled. He had two sharp canine teeth that poked out as he smiled. It made Máximo feel a little unnerved just looking at them. "Marius."

One magical trio

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this chapter is a bit of an experiment on my part! As you all have guessed by now, I love my italization! However, I can see how it can be confusing to read. As I use it for any reason between thinking, talking when super angry, or emphasizing a word. So for this chapter. As it's a story being told while some parts are also being told to you by Lukas. I've decided to make those both Bold and Italicized for the fact that if I just keep it Italicized it feels like thinking and it's not that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Once, many years ago there were only three of us. Marius, Arthur, and I. We were the three most powerful mermen in the sea. Between the three of us, my magic was the weakest. But, at the time, it didn't matter. We were friends, best friends even. We didn't need to worry about who was the strongest. We even made a pact to protect each other when the time came to it."

"How'd you guys even meet?"

"It started when I was young. Younger than Emil. and it all started with a Tiger shark."

"A Tiger shark?"

"Did I stutter, Andersen?"

Little Lukas's heart absolutely raced as he swam as fast as he could. He thought he smelt blood in the water and it seemed he was right. And now he was next to becoming a tiger shark's next meal. The shark's teeth snapped at Lukas's dark blue tail and nearly nicked him. Lukas made a sharp turn as did the shark.

"Leave me alone!" Lukas cried out hoping that'll make the shark back down. It didn't. Tiger sharks are rather relentless when it comes to their food.

Oh, how his father had warned him to stay away from sharks but did Lukas listen? No.

Lukas looked forward and then narrowed his eyes. Coming up to a gorge now he could see a crack in one of the walls. A crevice that just might be big enough for him to squeeze through. Lukas really didn't care if it had another opening on the other side or not, he just needed to be free from this monster.

So, with his tail in high speed, Lukas gave it everything he got.

The opening got closer and closer and Lukas didn't stop. He didn't stop until he was inside the crevice in the gorge. He hissed in pain as he had to jerk his tail inside just before it got bitten. Unfortunately because of his carelessness; the end of his left tail fin had ripped and a bit more blood started to pour out and this only fueled the shark's frenzy.

Lukas tried to bury himself deeper into the crack in the wall as the shark dug itself into the crack and snapped its powerful jaws open and closed in an attempt to grab him. The crevice wasn't that big and Lukas hardly had any wiggle room. He got nicked and cut at every angle he could think of.

Thankfully, Lukas was *just* out of this shark's reach. The shark, at one point, stopped his attack. This was just to make sure that Lukas was still in there. And when their eyes met. Lukas felt his stomach drop as he stared into those beady black eyes. Then the shark backed off. Surprisingly.

But it was waiting. Oh, how it was waiting. Lukas could see the shark swimming round and round waiting... no. Daring Lukas to attempt to escape the predicament he got himself into.

Lukas looked around frantically for an exit.

What he found was a tiny crack, no bigger than his index finger behind him. Lukas used one eye to look through it. A part of him thought it was stupid and the only thing he was going to see was more rock.

But, what he saw surprised him. More ocean. A part of the ocean that he knew he's never seen before. He looked away for a moment to look back at the shark. The shark was still swimming around. Waiting, wanting Lukas to emerge from the crack in the wall. Lukas felt his heartbeat rapidly when he saw another shark suddenly join in the fray. If he were to emerge there's no doubt it'd be a feeding frenzy.

Lukas swallowed hard and looked back through the little crack in the wall. He didn't know why. But he did.

He nearly threw himself to the sharks when he saw a bright green eye staring back at him.

"Ello! Ello there!" A little voice called to him. Lukas didn't recognize this voice or accent for that matter.

"Hello?" He asked.

"I thought I was all alone, well say for my imaginary friends that is!" The voice on the other side sounded absolutely ecstatic to be talking to someone else. Lukas shyly put his eye back up to the hole. "Do you have a name?"

"Uh... Lukas."

"I'm Arthur!"

"Arthur, I don't mean to disturb you-"

"No disturbance! I was getting lonely!"

"-Yes, well... Do you know how to get rid of sharks?"

"Sharks- Oh, that was *your* blood! Of course, give me a moment."

Lukas sighed in relief. He didn't know what this Arthur was going to do to get the sharks-

All Lukas saw was green as the whole ocean seemed to shake and rock violently. Lukas clutched into the sides of the crevice to keep himself in place. He honestly feared the whole place would collapse around him. He shut his eyes and waited for the shaking to just stop before it got any worse. The hairs on his arms and the back of his neck started to stand up. He felt a pull like he was going to get sucked into a whirlpool. His head started to spin and his senses started to go haywire.

Thankfully, only moments later the violent shaking stopped and the color returned to normal.

Lukas leaned his back against the wall and put a hand on his chest. He could feel his heart hammering away and he honestly didn't know if he should feel relieved or scared.

"Lukas?" Arthur's chipper voice suddenly came from the other side of the wall. "Are you alright there, mate?"

Lukas, shakily, brought his eye back to the hole. Arthur was there and waiting for him. "I... what was that?" he gasped.

"I got rid of the sharks for you!"

Lukas blinked slowly and swam away from the peephole and poked his head cautiously out of the crevice. Arthur did just as he said. The tiger sharks were nowhere to be found. "Wow! How'd you do it?" Lukas swam back to the peephole.

"I turned them back into guppies."

Lukas soaked up the information relayed to him. He blinked in confusion before looking back through the peephole. "What?"

"I turned them back into guppies! It was rather simple!"

'Simple?!'

Lukas knew about magic, hell, he knew he himself had some magical abilities, but that wasn't natural or 'simple' for that matter. It made Lukas shake to his very core. "Well, I must thank you." He swallowed hard and tried to keep up his emotionless tone. "You've saved me and for that I'm in your debt-"

"-Now that you mention it!"

"Wah!" Lukas clutched his chest as Arthur poked his head through the crevice. He was upside down and dark blonde hair 'floofed' into a ball as a result. Arthur was grinning brightly

showing that he was missing a front tooth, something that would grow back soon, no doubt. His green eyes absolutely sparkled with joy as he looked at Lukas.

"-Since you're 'in my debt' and all. Why don't we play a game?" Arthur asked and he straightened himself up so he was upright now.

"A... game?" Lukas poked his head out of the crevice to look at Arthur more fully.

Arthur's sand-colored hair was awfully uneven and rather untamed at that. His eyebrows were thick and bushy and his eyes were such a shade of green that made Lukas think of the color of plankton. His tail matched his eyes perfectly. He had two wavy-like fins on his sides that reminded Lukas of a goldfish's fins.

This told Lukas that this kid wasn't of the same breed as he was. As Lukas's own blue tail only had the triangle fin at the bottom and it was like a dolphin's tail.

He, like Lukas, was just a child. Of course, Lukas figured this out the moment he heard Arthur speak. Still, that didn't help Lukas's growing nerves. A child turned sharks into guppies!

"Yes, a game! I'm rather bored and there's a ship not too far from here."

'Well, he did just save me.' Lukas thought but still worried if Arthur was planning a sort of trap for him. "Oh, but I would suggest healing yourself before we take off." Arthur spoke and pointed to Lukas's torn tail. Lukas could see blood slowly leaking out of the tear.

"... I don't know how," Lukas admitted rather sadly as he brought his tail up to his eyes to get a better look at it.

"Oh, I get it. You're joking! That's the easiest thing to do!" Arthur laughed but stopped laughing when he saw that Lukas wasn't joking. "I see." He muttered rather stoically. "Your guardians never showed you how to use your magic properly?"

Lukas shrugged. "Not really." He admitted. Then again his guardians didn't stay around for too long.

Arthur lifted his chin stubbornly. "Well, We can't have *that* now, can we! C'mon. I'll show you the ropes to magic." Before Lukas could attempt to protest Arthur grabbed him by the hand and lead him out of the crevice. "Now, healing is really quite simple. Simpler than turning sharks into guppies!"

"I don't know, I don't think I'm all that magical-"

"Of course you are! I can see it within you. Why with the right training you might become as strong as me!"

Arthur chose a nice spot on the ocean floor. Lukas feared as they were out in the open that more sharks would probably come after the scent of his blood, but then he noticed that Arthur's eyes were glowing. It was then did Lukas look up and see that Arthur had made a shield around them-

"-Okay. So that's how you met Arthur. I get it, he trained you in magic. Pretty neat, but what about this Marius-fellow? I thought he'd be there as well."

"Don't interrupt me, Andersen. I'm getting there."

"Now, focus. Lukas. Focus." Arthur urged Lukas. Per Arthur's instructions, Lukas had both hands on the cut end of his tail. He felt like he's been doing this for hours at this point, but in reality, it's only been closer to fifteen minutes. Still, at this point, he was determined to learn.

'Clear your mind. Focus on the wound.' He repeated Arthur's instructions in his head. He sucked in a slow breath and shut his eyes. Maybe that would help him. He thought about the tear on his fin. He thought about how he wanted nothing more than to have it healed so he could, in all honesty, move on with the rest of his day.

It was the strangest feeling for him. He felt warmth under his fingertips and then, under his closed eyelids, he saw a light that turned his vision red.

"I knew you could do it!" Arthur cheered proudly as he clapped his hands. Lukas opened his eyes just in time to see a cyan light fading from his hands. With shaky hands, he moved them back and saw that his little tear was completely healed.

"I did it..." Lukas blinked in shock.

"You did it!" Arthur clapped his hands again. His eyes no longer glowed and when Lukas looked up the shield was gone.

"I didn't think I had magic in me." Lukas got up and examined his tail from every angle he possibly could. He almost couldn't believe that he was actually able to heal himself.

"Lucky you ran into me then. I can see the magic in you." Arthur stated in a rather matter-of-fact tone as he leaned in uncomfortably close to Lukas's face.

"Uh..." That was all Lukas could really say about that. Arthur was quick to back off, thankfully.

"I know you don't understand, most don't, but I can see things. Things others can't." Arthur explained in a soft tone. There was another tone in his voice, an underlying tone of fear. Like it was taking Arthur a bit of courage to admit this.

"I see... I think that's pretty neat!"

Arthur beamed at this. "I'm glad you understand! Most people usually make excuses to leave at this point." Arthur blushed a little out of embarrassment and scratched the back of his head.

Lukas really didn't know what to say, but his stomach helped ease the sudden tension as it growled loudly. Arthur laughed a small little laugh. "I see. C'mon, I know the best spot for picking fish."

"Okay." Lukas was glad for the change of subject, yet he was still a little intrigued. He wanted to learn more about his own magic. Maybe after a quick meal though. On their way to

wherever Arthur was taking him, they made small talk.

It was about their guardians. Arthur had parents, but they didn't stay for long. Parents usually never do; they had an ocean to explore and children weigh them down. His brother Allistor stayed with him for a while, but one day Arthur woke and Allistor was gone.

Lukas's story was pretty much the same. He just woke up one day and his parents were gone. He's been on his own ever since.

Soon they were at a drop-off where there were lots of different kinds of fish that swam around. Lukas's stomach gurgled loudly again and he tried to snatch a small minnow, but he just missed it. He wanted to give chase but was stopped by Arthur. "Huh?" Lukas blinked and then looked at Arthur in question.

Arthur was now at alert and was darting his eyes around. "We're not alone," Arthur spoke low and slow as he continued to look around. Arthur flicked his tail and swam up just a bit. Lukas frowned as he watched Arthur look around frantically.

"You know-" A voice came from Lukas's left. Both he and Arthur turned in that direction. Arthur started to lower himself back to the ground as another boy came sauntering up to them in an unimpressed matter. "-That little magic trick you did back there was rather wild."

Arthur blinked and squinted his eyes at this newcomer.

The kid was no bigger or older than the two of them. He had light brown hair that was normal compared to Arthur's shaggy mop. His eyes were a deep shade of red and his tail matched this fact. Lukas took note of this kid's tail. It wasn't like his or Arthur's. The fins were sharper on the end and he had a dorsal fin that started from the base of his spine and ended only three or four inches downward. Neither Arthur or Lukas had such a fin.

Arthur hummed slightly before tilting his head. "You saw that?"

"I felt it! You woke me up, you know that? But, still, I'm rather impressed. I expected a grown merman, not... you."

"... You're very magical yourself. I can see it," Arthur spoke as he started to swim up to this kid. Lukas watched as Arthur swam around the stranger in an attempt to look at him from every angle.

"I'm Lukas." Lukas greeted the kid.

"..." The kid looked at Lukas for a few seconds before looking back at Arthur who had stopped next to Lukas. "Call me... Vla- No." He paused. "Marius."

"Did you just come up with that name?" Arthur asked

"Yeah," Marius confessed. "... " He then looked away and it clicked for Lukas.

If Marius had parents they either didn't stick around for long or they left him alone. It's clear it clicked for Arthur as well. "I see..." Arthur actually mumbled. "Is it possible?"

"Is what possible?" Lukas was the one to ask. Arthur looked ready to reply, but shut his mouth quickly and shook his head.

"It's probably nothing. So, Marius, Lukas, and I were getting some fish. Would you like to join in?" Arthur politely asked. Marius blinked before smiling.

"I'd like that."

"-Arthur cheated."

"He cheated?"

"With the fish. He used his magic to stun them as they swam on by."

"I'm going out on a limb here. He's the strongest?"

"... At the time? Yes, he would later tell me that Allistor trained him with his magic. So he knew a lot more than the two of us."

"Are you saying he's not the strongest now?"

"... Arthur wasn't joking when he told Marius that he was very powerful. I'll get to that if I can. Just let me continue. This story is almost over."

"If I ever have children, I don't think I'll leave them the way my parents did me," Arthur spoke as he laid down on the sandy ocean bottom. He had eaten more than his fair share of fish and now bloated and tired as a result. Lukas and Marius both laid down next to him also bloated and full of fish. The most fish Lukas had ever eaten really.

Marius nodded. "Me too. I don't want my child to wake up one day and wonder where I've gone off to. You know?"

Lukas sighed. "I don't want children too much responsibility-"

"-Hahaha!"

"Don't laugh at me and stop interrupting dammit or else we're going to be here all night!"

"I- Heh- I'm sorry. Continue."

For the first time in forever, Lukas wasn't alone. The three of them, they all just clicked, it was like they were made for one another. They didn't want to be alone either, they became something uncommon. They stayed with each other and practiced their magic. Lukas was rather surprised with how easy he was catching on. He already knew how to make a shield thanks to Arthur and his healing was on point.

Marius also knew a bit of magic himself and turned out to be a faster learner than Lukas.

Lukas watched Marius grow bored of shields and healing magic. No, he preferred more offensive magic and Lukas watched with amazement as Marius learned how to bend his

magic so easily to his will. He trained with his magic for a long time. He tried to perfect whatever he wanted to show them. Marius was ecstatic when it came time to show off his months of hard work.

"No shark will ever- and I mean *ever* try and take a bite out of us again." Marius confidently spoke as he swam ahead of them.

"That's a bold claim there, chap," Arthur smirked as he took a seat on a nearby boulder. His arms crossed over his chest as he watched Marius.

"I'm telling you. The three of us? I think we have the potential to change things around here."

Lukas actually huffed a soft laugh at that. "C'mon. Change things? Us? Yeah, we're magical, but we can't just change the natural order of things."

"Why not? Humans do it all the time."

"But we're not human." Arthur pointed out.

Marius argued. "We're half. That has to count for something."

Lukas just shrugged. Marius had somewhat of a point as feeble as it was. Lukas really just let it slide because he wanted to get a move on already. He's been watching Marius practice for months. Now it was showtime and Lukas was rather interested in what Marius had planned. It seemed Arthur had the same idea because he backed off just as well. "Very well, just show us your little trick."

Marius grinned showing off his two sharp canine teeth as a result. Marius then swam away quickly and rapidly.

"I swear if he just brought us here to leave us..." Arthur huffed as he crossed his arms.

Lukas watched Marius swim up to a nearby coral polyp and purposely cut his hand on it. Both Lukas and Arthur jumped up at this. "He's gone mad." Arthur gasped.

Lukas didn't respond. He didn't know how to at that moment. Lukas's heart started to beat rapidly.

Marius was at a rather far distance, but just close enough that they could see and smell his blood start to waft around them. It only took about thirty seconds for the first shark to start barreling its way towards Marius.

It was a great white shark of all sharks, and it wasn't monstrous size but big enough to scare any responsible and sensible merperson into hiding. But Marius, Lukas realized, was not sensible or responsible. The shark was coming from behind Marius.

"Marius!" Arthur gasped and looked ready to leap into action and make a shield, but then Marius's eyes started to glow. They glowed an ungodly shade of red almost mimicking the blood pouring out of his hand. His hand, the one that wasn't bleeding, started to glow the same shade of red.

It was right when the shark opened its giant maw, ready to chomp down on Marius for dinner, was when Marius attacked. He spun around so quickly that Lukas hardly had time to see Marius's magic bend and make an arc. The red magic connected with the shark and sent the animal spinning to its side and crashing into a nearby reef. This caused several scratches to form on the shark as coral was rather sharp, but something else also formed on the shark. Before the shark could turn and swim away as fast as it could, Lukas took a good look at the spot that Marius had created with his magic.

From the tip of the shark's nose down to the tip of its tail fin was a large scar. A scar that was now starting to bleed as Marius's attack had cut into the shark's body as a result.

"Holy-" Arthur only gasped as they watched the shark flee for its life.

Lukas's jaw was on the ocean floor.

Marius turned to them, he offered a shaky smile and then collapsed.

"Marius!" Lukas gasped and was the first to race to him, Arthur not too far behind him. The two of them dropped down. Lukas grabbed Marius's head while Arthur grabbed Marius's wrist. Air bubbles escaped his mouth and instantly the two of them relaxed. "Idiot overdid it." Arthur muttered and picked Marius up by his tail. Lukas held Marius by the shoulders and together they started to awkwardly swim while holding an unconscious Marius. They just wanted to get him to safety.

"You have to admit it. That was impressive."

"Of course it was. It was some of the most impressive magic I've ever seen. But it was foolish."

"... I want to learn how to do that," Lukas admitted as they continued to swim. "He's right. We could change things with this kind of magic."

"I know. It's exciting to think about, but... is it really possible?"

"Only one way to find out, right?"

"It could get us killed."

"Yes, but I guess that makes it more exciting, doesn't it?"

Arthur didn't respond, but his small little smile was enough of a response for Lukas. Together they brought Marius to a safe place to sleep and when Marius would awake, almost twelve hours later, the three of them would begin to plan the changes they would make to the ocean.

"You became tyrants?!"

"What? No!"

"Well, jeez. It sounded like that to me."

"Well, we didn't. Granted not everyone agreed with our magic. We've had our fair share of fights from other merpeople who wanted to keep tradition up. I think I still have a scar on my back where someone tried to bite me."

"They bit you?"

"I think they were trying to either paralyze or cripple me in some way."

"Okay, okay. I have to know more! What about Emil? Arthur's kids? How did the falling out with Marius start-"

"Andersen, please."

"Sorry."

"Unfortunately, I don't think I can tell you all of that tonight. We should get home."

"Aw! But I'm invested now."

"In due time. I swear, I'll tell you more, my friend. But Emil has school, I have work and so do you. I promise I'll explain everything to you. Just not all tonight. There's not enough time."

"Fine."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Okay. I have like two more back stories lined up in my head and it'll all be spread out so it's not a whole big info dump. Ya' feel me?

But I do have one question before I go. Did you guys like this style of writing. With the story and the commentary in bold and italics? Or would you rather I do it straight without the commentary and questions? Or would you rather I do it a completely other way? Let me know! I need to know these things from you guys :3.

The end of a wild day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

'I'm going to get my ass beat.' Ludwig thought as he silently sat in the living room while Gilbert and Máximo exchanged words at the front door.

Ludwig knew Gilbert would never normally result in spankings, but he had a feeling that this time Gilbert might not be so patient with him. *'Just tell him the truth... but he seemed rather mad...'* Ludwig frowned a little as he remembered Gilbert's enraged face as he told Ludwig to "Go sit in the living room. I'll talk to you in a moment." Gilbert's voice was short and sharp showing that he was absolutely outraged at Ludwig right now.

But if Ludwig told him the truth... would it even be enough?

Finally, the front door shut. It didn't slam shut, no, it was a simple soft shut. Ludwig wiggled in the chair as he watched his brother. He watched as Gilbert rested his back against the door and then pinched the bridge of his nose before shaking his head slowly. At that moment Gilbert looked to be about ten years older than his actual age. Finally, Gilbert let out a slow sigh, brought his hand down, and looked at Ludwig.

And boy did Ludwig gulp.

Gilbert's eyebrows arched down in anger, he clenched his jaw before turning his lips into a bit of a snarl, and his stare turned icy.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Gilbert asked in a slow voice as he stormed up to Ludwig. "Are you aware that this will probably cause an investigation!?" Gilbert yelled as he pointed to the door. Ludwig flinched a little at that. "Do you want to get taken away?!"

"Of course I don't!" Ludwig panicked and as a result, yelled in German.

"Then why didn't you wake me!?" Gilbert's voice almost broke with desperation as he yelled back in German.

Ludwig felt his breath hitch slightly and Gilbert got down on one knee and grabbed Ludwig by his shoulders. It was gentle he wasn't aiming to hurt Ludwig he just wanted Ludwig to look into his eyes. "Do you know how worried I was when I went to Kiku and he told me you never came to him?" There was a certain desperation in Gilbert's eyes. A longing or maybe it was a need? Either way, it made Ludwig's guilt start to swim. "Why?" Gilbert finally asked.

Ludwig swallowed a lump in his throat. "I... You were passed out and from experience, I knew it'd be hard to wake you." Ludwig started as he looked down at his neatly tied shoes. "Feliciano came by last night, you were drunk and never even spoke to him, but he said he was going to run away and I knew I had to be fast to keep up with him."

"But why'd you want to run away with him?"

"I didn't!" Ludwig's face turned red, whether it was from almost getting ready to cry or anger he didn't know. He felt his emotions flush and he tried to stifle them down. It wasn't working. "I-I...Feli... I feared Feli..." Ludwig sucked in a deep breath and tried again. "I don't know. I just feared that if he went off on his own he..." Ludwig trailed off.

"He?"

"He'd die," Ludwig spoke softly with a headshake. "I know it sounds stupid." Ludwig bit his trembling lower lip and did his hardest to blink the tears back. One day he will get a hold of his emotions, but today was not that day. "So, I went with him. I just wanted to watch over him to make sure he'd be safe."

"..." Gilbert's anger seemed to subside for a moment as his tense shoulders slumped slightly. "I see..." Gilbert sighed and then sat down on the floor. Gilbert quietly rubbed his temples with his right hand and thought about it. For a few seconds, nothing was said between them. Finally, Gilbert cracked an eye open to look at Ludwig. "And that guy? Ma...Marry?"

"Marius?"

"Yeah? a Lot of 'M-a' names going around lately..." Gilbert muttered. "What's the deal with him?"

Ludwig frowned a little. His emotions were stabilizing and the threat of tears was over (for now). "Yeah, he was already on the beach when we got there."

"Was he... *weird*?"

Ludwig wasn't dumb, he knew exactly what his brother was implying. Ludwig shook his head "He was pleasant. He talked to us and asked us where our parents were. Feliciano told him we were running away and... well... he wasn't *weird* but he whispered something to Feliciano."

Gilbert tensed. "What'd he say?"

"I don't know. He spoke too softly for me to hear, but whatever he said made Feliciano perk up."

"I see."

"He wasn't *weird*, but I had a feeling... so I did something bad," Ludwig confessed.

"Which was?"

"I had Feliciano's pack..."

"Yeah?"

"...So, I opened it and while Feli was talking to the guy... I threw Pookie on the beach."

Gilbert blinked in surprise.

"Then I handed Feliciano his pack back right when the guy took Feliciano by the hand. It was rather awkward. I felt like a third wheel, I don't know why but Marius had no interest in me, just Feliciano..."

Ludwig paused and exhaled the breath he had been holding in. "-As expected Feliciano wanted to show this stranger Pookie and... oh no. Pookie is gone."

Gilbert had to suppress a laugh at that.

"Obviously Feliciano started freaking out and started backtracking for Pookie. I'm watching Marius and he just looked... a cross between bemused and upset? If that's even a thing. Regardless. My plan worked as you and Máximo were back there."

Gilbert stayed quiet for a long time. Over thirty seconds. His mind is reeling, Ludwig could see it. Finally, after maybe a whole minute, Gilbert reached up and gently patted Ludwig's head. "Smart move." Gilbert gives in and ruffled Ludwig's hair. "You saw a situation and you bought time."

"So, you're not mad?"

Gilbert pulled Ludwig down into a hug. They embraced and Gilbert hugged Ludwig tightly before chuckling. "I'm still upset, yes, and I still have to punish you for leaving without even attempting to tell me. So... you're grounded for today and tomorrow, but aside from that. No. I'm not mad anymore."

Ludwig looked up and smiled at Gilbert. Gilbert chuckled a little and pushed some of Ludwig's hair out of his eyes. "Still, be glad you don't live with Roderich. I've known him for a long time. He's not exactly one to 'spare the rod' so to speak."

Ludwig made an uncomfortable face.

"Exactly."

"Feli is going to get it..."

"Probably... still, that makes me wonder."

"What?"

"What that Marius guy told him to make him willingly go with him. Feliciano might not be the brightest, but you think after what happened the other day..." Gilbert pondered to himself.

"... I don't know what he said, but I know this much. Feliciano told me he wanted to run away to stop the fighting."

"Fighting- oh, between Eliza and Lovino, I take it?"

Ludwig nodded. "I tried to tell him that'll just cause more fighting, but he didn't listen to me."

"Hm. *He promised...*" Gilbert frowned as he rubbed his chin in thought. He was quoting what Feliciano had yelled about 'the nice man' before. It was just a single line but now it was coming back to Gilbert.

"Huh?"

"...Nothing." Gilbert bit his lip, but his mind was wondering now. All the dead kids in the last five years, one every summer and only ever in the summer months. And it was summer now, and how that's *three times* now that Feliciano was on the beach and was almost snatched or drowned. It was just too much of a coincidence.

Could Marius had something to do with it?

Well, Marius himself had said the beach was unsafe... but why? As far as Gilbert knew nobody else really took note of the dead children, say for their unfortunate parents.

Something really wasn't adding up and Gilbert didn't like it. It was making his skin crawl.

"So... where's Matthew?"

"Huh?" Gilbert blinked and looked up at Ludwig.

"Matthew? He was here last night? Did Máximo pick him up?"

"Uh-" Gilbert blushed. "Look if anybody asks, especially Máximo, Matthew was never here last night, alright?"

Ludwig pursed his lips to the side. He was absolutely a hundred percent judging Gilbert for this. "I see. Shame."

"Huh?" Gilbert tilted his head.

"Well, I actually liked Matthew. Despite him throwing up in the bathroom last night that is."

'I think I told Feliciano something I shouldn't have last night.' Matthew's voice came back into Gilbert's mind.

"Hey, speaking of which. What did he tell Feliciano last night?"

Ludwig shrugged. "I dunno. Something that had to be a secret. That's all I heard. It made Feliciano happy whatever it was."

Gilbert huffed. *'I'm hitting dead ends every which way I go.'* he thought and just shook his head. It's been a long day and right now the only thing on his mind was that his little brother was safe. Still, in the back of Gilbert's mind, there was a nagging feeling. Something telling him that Marius meeting them on the beach might have been more than a coincidence.

'Marius... Marius.... I swear I've heard that name before.' Máximo tapped his fingers against his steering wheel as he drove back to his apartment.

After dropping Feliciano off with his foster parents, and warning said parents that he *will* come back tomorrow; It was now almost five pm, a whole day up and gone and no doubt Matthew would be upset for being left behind for so long.

'To be fair, I didn't think it'd take all day.' Máximo huffed. If he would have known how long he'd be gone for he would have brought Matthew along with him and dropped him off at the station.

No doubt Ivan would want to talk to him about that tomorrow. But now his shift was over. *'Marius.'* It was just in the back of his mind that kept resurfacing like a tumor. Who was Marius and why did that name sound so familiar?

Máximo snorted and just shook his head as he turned down the street. The sun was still high in the sky, but just low enough to stab Máximo right in the corneas. With a grunt of discomfort, Máximo lowered his sun visor and continued to drive. *'I should really get some sunglasses- who is Marius?- Stop it!- But who is he? That name. I know I heard it somewhere before. It's not exactly a common name.'*

Máximo shook his head and scrunched his nose as the thoughts ran. He just needed to sit down after this exhausting day. So that's why he was pretty relieved when he drove to his apartment- oh and look at that, it was still standing!

He parked and got out. Once he got out of his car he stretched his arms wide before stretching them over his head. His belly jiggled at this movement and he grumbled. "I should really start working out again." He thought before lowering his arms. It's the sad truth that he's been letting himself go these past couple of years.

Máximo locked his car door and made the slow walk back to his apartment. Up the stairs and eventually, he was to his door. He knew he had forgotten to lock it this morning, but when he turned the handle it wouldn't budge. It was locked.

Máximo gave a bit of a frown before just shrugging it off. Matthew obviously must have locked it- *'Or locked himself out by accident.'* Máximo paused when he thought about it and felt his blood run cold at the thought. *'What if Matthew had gone out looking for you, you dope! He might be lost! Or worse-'* Before the worst of Máximo's thoughts could get into his head the lock clicked and the door opened by a very sick and tired looking Matthew.

Matthew blinked. "-Oh-"

"Oh!"

Both had spoken their surprise at the same time. Máximo was more surprised by how sickly Matthew had looked and Matthew... well, Máximo could only speculate what was going through Matthew's mind right now.

"-I'm s-" Matthew had started quickly but Máximo suddenly put his hand on Matthew's forehead causing him to jump.

"-I'm sorry I had to leave you, *amigo*." When Máximo didn't feel any heat coming off of Matthew he made his way into the apartment. Matthew moved back and looked a little confused but Máximo shrugged that off for now. "-There was an emergency." Máximo undid his utility belt and hung up on his coat rack. "I promise I won't do that again. Next time I'll wake you." Máximo leaned down to untie his shoes. "I didn't mean to cut you off. What were you going to say?"

"..." Matthew didn't answer right away and Máximo didn't get a look at his face at that moment. If he would have looked he would have seen bewildered astonishment before Matthew would inevitably speak. "I... I just wanted... to ask what happened?"

"Long story short. Feliciano tried to run away." He gave Matthew the basic and when he turned around he saw Matthew frowning while looking down at the carpet. He seemed to be thinking about something intensely.

"I see..."

"*Amigo*, you don't look so good."

"I... I have a headache and my stomach is sour." Matthew explained as he clutched his stomach that was no doubt turning. Instantly Máximo felt guilty. '*A headache and a sour stomach. He hasn't eaten anything. Damn. He probably hasn't drunk anything either. Way to go.*' Máximo thought as finally all thoughts on Marius were pushed behind him for the time being.

"C'mon, I'll make you something light to eat. You must be starved." Máximo patted Matthew on the shoulder.

"I'm never drinking again."

Kiku would be lying if he said seeing Alfred huddled and trembling under the blanket didn't make him give out a bit of a chuckle. He sat down on the edge of the bed a cup of water in his hand. He plopped two Alka Seltzers in and watched them bubble before he tapped the blankets.

"I don't understand, you really didn't drink that much last night." Kiku hummed as Alfred's hand crept out of the blankets to take the offering. Neither of them did. They each had two drinks each and Alfred was hardly buzzed let alone drunk. But here he was suffering a hangover. Maybe he just got dehydrated?

"I don't understand either, but here I am," Alfred responded as he started to drink. Kiku tilted his head in thought. He tapped his chin before an idea popped into his mind.

"It couldn't be some twin sense thing, could it? You did say you had a twin brother."

"Yeah, I do, but he's not here. He's in the ocean." Alfred finally emerged from his blanket sanctuary and grimaced at the light. "Besides, Matt isn't exactly the 'party' type."

Kiku frowned and thought about his encounter last night with the man who looked suspiciously like Alfred. "... are you sure he's not on the land?"

Alfred dug his palms into his eyes as he rubbed them viciously. As he was rubbing his eyes he spoke. "I'm positive. There's no way he'd be on the land. Besides, even if he were on the land I don't think he'd be drinking. He's a bit of a buzzkill. A Liam in the making I like to say." Alfred sighed and lowered his hands from his eyes. "Why?"

"... Well, last night there was this guy... but if you say your brother wouldn't be drinking... I doubt it was him then. He just looked a lot like you." Alfred chuckled and Kiku continued. "I guess he just had an unfortunate face."

"Don't be mean!" Alfred lightly smacked Kiku with a nearby pillow.

"C'mon." Kiku stood up from his spot from the edge of the bed and extended a hand to Alfred. Their previous conversation now in the past as he changed the subject. "Stop lazing about."

"But my head hurts," Alfred whined as he stood up regardless.

"Yes, but you promised. I took you clubbing last night, now you get to help me in the garden."

Alfred gave an over-exaggerated sigh putting on the dramatics of a teenager as he threw his head back. "Fiiiiine."

Kiku laughed. "It won't be too bad. You might even like it." He locked his arm into Alfred's and started to lead him towards the back door. Kiku spotted the beer can before he even finished opening the blinds. He recognized the brand and scrunched his nose in disgust. He opened the door and led Alfred outside.

It was almost five in the afternoon and so the sun was high and bright making the air hot and sticky. Kiku let Alfred shut the door behind him and he went for the beer can.

"Gross, I didn't do that, did I?" Alfred asked as he took the can from Kiku.

"Again, you weren't drunk last night... but regardless no. I don't think you did. It was probably Gilbert."

Alfred hummed as he tossed the can up and down in his palm a few times. "I see." He spoke aloud. Then before Kiku could dispose of the rubbish Alfred cocked his arm back and with an expert throw, he tossed the can right on top of Gilbert's windshield. "There we go. Problem solved!" Alfred grinned back at Kiku.

Kiku just sighed. "I fear the outcome of this." He muttered. But the beer can was out of his garden. That's all that mattered right now. But he knew to keep Mr. Broomstick on standby, just in case.

Andersen jerked awake when his arm was swept from under his chin, slamming his forehead into his desk as a result. "Up. I'm not paying you to sleep." Ivan grunted and he placed a hot cup of coffee on Andersen's desk. Andersen rubbed his tired eyes and grunted a 'thank you'.

"Stay up late last night?" Ivan asked him as Andersen reached for the black coffee and started to tentatively sip the bitter drink. He was going to need it; he was on a long shift tonight.

"Yeah, Emil kept me up. Nightmares, you know?" He lied to Ivan as he took another sip before finally getting back to his paperwork. It was so boring! Nobody ever told him as a kid that being a cop involved a lot of paperwork.

"I feel it," Ivan muttered as he looked out at the other officers in the precinct. He was watching them all with his eagle eyes making sure nobody was slacking and then without another word he took off, accidentally knocking down the picture on Andersen's desk as a result.

"Jeez." Andersen grumbled as he picked the frame up and inspected it.

It was his favorite picture, hence why he framed it and put it up on his desk at work. He, Lukas, and Emil had gone out to Disneyland a few years prior. Was it a happy picture with all of them in goofy little mouse hats? Of course not! It was an absolutely swelteringly hot Florida day. Lukas was sweating like crazy and Emil was cranky from the heat.

Andersen had asked a random lady to take their picture, hoping to just get something good out of the trip. Well, the lady clearly never held a camera before and snapped the picture before they were ready. The picture was lopsided, Andersen's tired face was partially cut off, Lukas had his arm up in an attempt to wipe the sweat from his brow, and Emil was crying about something that Andersen couldn't remember. All in all, it really summed up their time at Disney. So that's why Andersen chose to frame it.

Andersen felt eyes on him and he swiveled his head over his shoulder to look behind him, but all he saw was some guy in a red coat making his way towards the exit of the precinct. Andersen narrowed his eyes before shaking his head and taking a sip of his coffee. His lack of sleep was making him paranoid.

The sun had set now. The night had fully engulfed the town and one by one lights went out as the people needed their sleep for the night.

For the Oxenstierna-Väinämöinen household. It was peacefully quiet. The lights were out and if one were to look at their house they'd think the whole family was asleep.

Well, that wasn't the case. As Tino stood at the doorway of their newest addition and quietly watched the young blonde sleep peacefully. Honestly, it would be a rather creepy sight to see an adult watching a child, that technically isn't even theirs, sleep.

Peter slept peacefully on his side; his back to the door.

Tino's hands shook as he wrapped his right hand around the cross necklace he had around his neck. The cross itself dug into his palm he didn't mind the pain it told him that he was very much awake

"Come to bed," Berwald spoke softly as he came up behind Tino. Tino felt Berwald put one of his hands on his shoulder and Berwald gently rubbed a circle on Tino's back. "You have to teach in the morning."

"Five more minutes." Tino almost begged, he sounded like a little kid that didn't want to sleep; not like an adult who had a job to do at the crack of dawn.

Berwald thought of the last time Tino had been near this room before it was occupied; Tino was dusting.

About an hour later Berwald came home to find Tino hysterically sobbing next to the bed on his knees, Sven's beloved watercolor stained comforter bunched into his arms. Tino was absolutely wailing.

It turns out he had accidentally spilled some cleaner on the comforter; permanently staining it in one spot. It was when Tino had finally calmed down after hours of endless crying did they decide to put the comforter away in a box and locked the door to the room.

Now the room had an occupant, but it'll still never be the same and the comforter still stayed safely tucked away in a box. *'Would they have been friends? Enemies?'* Those were thoughts that just couldn't be answered, unfortunately.

"He's not going anywhere," Berwald reassured Tino as he leaned down and pressed his nose into the side of Tino's neck. He, Like Tino, knew the pain, of course, he did. Sven was his child as well. Losing him had hurt both of them in ways that could never fully be healed. Berwald, much like Tino, feared that they'd wake up and little Peter would be gone much like Sven. "Come to bed." he urged again.

"..." Tino frowned before letting out a soft snuffle. He brought his wrist to his nose before suddenly letting out a bursting sob. Berwald wordlessly pulled Tino into a hug. Tino let a few tears escape from his eyes before quickly wiping them away. When Tino had looked up at Berwald, Berwald had taken his glasses off to quickly wipe his own tears away.

Tino and him disconnected so they could wipe their tears. Tino used his palm while Berwald nimbly used his fingers to get the tears out of his eyes before they fell. "I'm sorry." Tino finally sniffed after a hiccup. "I'm just... What if he won't be here anymore?"

"Don't apologize," Berwald spoke in a gentle tone as he put his glasses back on his face. "He'll still be here in the morning. You know this." Berwald comforted Tino. Together they started to walk to their bedroom. Berwald cautiously draped his arm over Tino's shoulders. He gave one last glance to the little bedroom that was just across from their own bedroom.

"I'm scared, Berwald. This really feels too good to be true." Was the last thing Tino said before Berwald shut the bedroom door.

Peter, who had his back to the door through the whole thing, had his hands to his mouth so as not to make a noise. His eyes stung and when he heard the master room door shut he started to shake. He never wanted to hurt these people the way he was inevitably going to. He just wanted to get to know them, they always seemed so nice.

"Should we... adopt another child?"

When Peter heard them talk about it on the beach that faithful day he had no clue. He never would have guessed the pain they went through before hand. He figured they just wanted another child, not...

Not the truth.

Outside the thunder started to rumble and the hairs on the back of Peter's neck started to stand as he continued to shake. Marius wasn't far and he had a debt to collect. Peter's name was no doubt on the top of his list right now. Honestly for once, for a brief moment he wasn't thinking of himself and his wants. He thought about these nice people and realized how sad he'd make them if he were to up and vanish.

'It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt, Peter.' Liam's scolding voice forced it's way into Peter's mind and now Peter was actually starting to understand what Liam was trying to tell him.

"I can't believe it's come to this." Arthur sighed as he looked at Liam. At the end of the day he could always and only rely on Liam it seemed.

His eldest stood, yes, stood, before him on the beach. He was already wearing clothes. As, unfortunately, this wasn't the first time Liam had his two feet on the ground.

But that was another story for another day.

"Don't you worry about a thing, Pop! I'll bring 'em all home. This has gone on long enough."

"I can always count on you, Liam. Don't you dare hesitate with them. We need them here. In the ocean. Where they belong." Arthur sternly spoke each sentence.

Marius was on the move, Arthur wasn't an idiot. He felt the surge of magic and knew that meant that Marius was on the land. If Lukas wouldn't help him, then fine. Arthur will just have to stretch himself out thinner if that's what it takes.

"I just can't believe my clothes were still here after what... two years?" Liam laughed as he tied his boots. It was a simple outfit really. A beige button-down shirt, hiking shorts, tube socks, and brown hiking boots.

Of course, it was Arthur's own idea that kept Liam's clothes safe. Put them in a vacuum sealed pack and bury them in the sand near the shore. He had done that all those years ago... in fact, he was sure his own clothes were probably still on the beach somewhere...

"Yes, well, this isn't like two years ago. You know what you need to do now."

"Get Alfred, Peter, and Matthew."

"Exactly. I know you won't disappoint me. I'm counting on you, son. You are the last person I wanted on the surface right now, but i'm getting desperate. I can't... I can't take another heartbreak."

Liam finished tying his boots and quickly stood up. "Dad, I need to ask before I go."

"Yes?"

"If I see Marius on the land-"

"Do *not* engage. Do you hear me, Liam? He has tricks, tricks that will turn the humans against you in the blink of an eye. Not only that, but the humans... they are simple-minded. They won't understand. You'll end in jail or prison. So, if you see Marius and he doesn't have your brothers, you stay away from him."

Liam nodded. "Understood."

"Good. Stay safe."

"You and Lillie do the same, Pops."

Chapter End Notes

I think this is the first chapter where I have (almost) every side included. I couldn't think of anything for Lukas, but that's fine. Still, I know what some of you are thinking.

"Sweden/Berwald doesn't speak like that though!" I know I know! This was a serious moment I put in for him and honestly I couldn't ruin it by having every other word be... shortened? That and it's just easier if I make his sentences more blunt and to the point.

Still, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter!

A real date!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Days passed and the weather started to turn bad. Nobody paid too much mind to the change in the weather. It was summer and often summer meant showers and thunderstorms for days on end. It was just par for the course. So, life continued on as normal for everybody. Matthew was now focusing on reading. He was getting rather good at it and learning to recognize words.

Eduard, Iryna, and Máximo were all doing what they can to help him and it was working. He was learning new words every day. Soon he was reading thin little books.

Yet, Matthew was finding it harder to be cheery and happy as the days went on. He felt his spirit start to die and he wasn't as curious as he once was.

Soon Matthew was starting to realize that Eduard and Iryna weren't exactly being as helpful as they were at the start. They were helpful, of course, but they asked a lot of questions. A lot of the time they were repeating questions and Matthew, who although was naive, wasn't an idiot. He started to realize that they were trying to catch him in a lie. So, Matthew did his best to answer new questions, but if he felt they were repeating questions he would deflect it.

Then he was starting to realize something. It was becoming clear that what he was telling them wasn't private. They were constantly going to Ivan with their newfound information. He would watch them do this almost every day. They were his 'spies' in a sense.

"Didn't you ask me that question yesterday?"

Eduard frowned and tapped his fingers on his desk. "I'm just trying to get information. That's all." Eduard put on a fake smile as he shut his folder with an audible 'snap'. "We can't help you find your brothers if we don't know all the details."

"My brothers..." Matthew sighed as he crossed one leg over the other. It seemed like ages ago that his father gave him the command to find his troublesome brothers. In reality, it's only been two weeks. "I hope they're alright." He settled on saying, but that's not really what he was thinking. *'I've given up on trying to find them.'* was what was really on Matthew's mind.

He felt dejected and, honestly, slightly broken. Learning what his father had done and seeing Liam trying to lure children to their death. Why should he bother doing the right thing anymore? Why should he care if clearly, they didn't. Right?

He could make a life on the surface and forget about it all...

Couldn't he?

"Matthew, Is something on your mind?" Eduard picked up on Matthew's forlorn face.

"No." Matthew turned his head away.

"Matthew, I'm your therapist. You can talk to me."

"..." Matthew didn't feel too sure about that and Eduard took off his glasses with a sigh and thought for a moment.

"You have my promise that whatever you tell me won't leave this room."

'*Yeah right.*' Matthew's mouth twitched and he crossed his arms over his chest. Did he really want to tell Eduard his sudden melancholy? Would he sound ungrateful? Or worse: Would he be accused of just whining? Whatever it was, Matthew felt it ebb through his body and infect him.

Matthew promptly stood from his chair and Eduard said nothing. Matthew walked over to the nearby window. Despite the rain falling down in sheets Matthew could make out the ocean from his view. The waves violently rose and down; warning everybody to stay away. Matthew narrowed his eyes as he watched the waves. In the reflection of the window, he saw Eduard put his glasses back on his face.

Something else was making him keep his mouth shut: If he couldn't trust his father and brother, the two people who he obediently followed and listened to, how could he truly trust Eduard? Or Máximo for that matter? It was this strange paranoia that made his mouth clamp shut.

"... I guess we can end today's session there then." Eduard stood.

Matthew didn't bother to reply.

Matthew and Máximo had to stop by the store on the way back. Máximo, like Eduard, had picked up on Matthew's less than positive attitude. For Matthew, he felt like he was in the dark and the darkness was growing all around him. "Hey, don't shut-down now. It's not all that bad." Máximo had tried to get Matthew to smile by slightly nudging him with his shoulder. It didn't work and Matthew just kept his mouth shut. Matthew then bunched the top of his hair into his fist and leaned his head against the window.

Máximo frowned and then sighed. "Come on, *Amigo*. Let's just get what we need and get back home? Yeah? Watch a movie or something?"

Matthew shut his eyes and nodded. He really didn't feel like speaking right now.

So, Together he and Máximo left the car and hurried to the front of the store out of the rain. Matthew kept his hands in his pockets as he followed obediently behind Máximo. He had gotten a little wet from the rain and the inside of the store was freezing so it wasn't too long before he started to shiver just slightly. Still, as they walked along the aisles Máximo would pick up two products and compare them from time to time.

Matthew would read over Máximo's shoulders as he would do this. Matthew may be sad, but he was still rather proud that he was starting to learn. Even if some words escaped his mind. Like 'Quinoa.'

They went down another aisle and Máximo picked up two different bags of rice to read and compare. It was then did Matthew suddenly feel eyes on him. Matthew turned his head and there at the end of the aisle stood Gilbert with Ludwig.

Gilbert hadn't noticed them it seemed as he had his back turned and was looking at something else. Ludwig noticed though. Ludwig smiled and waved politely at Matthew.

Matthew gave a little smile and waved back.

Ludwig turned back to Gilbert and tugged on his sleeve. Matthew's smile slipped when he realized what Ludwig was doing and before Gilbert could look at him Matthew turned his back swiftly to focus back on Máximo.

"What do you think? Cilantro lime? Or just plain jasmine rice?" Máximo asked in an attempt to engage Matthew.

"Uh..." Matthew looked over his shoulder just for a moment. Yep, Gilbert was staring at him now. Matthew quickly made it look like he wasn't looking. "Whichever." He settled on saying.

He heard Gilbert awkwardly clear his throat, an attempt to get Matthew's attention? 'No.' Matthew thought and didn't look over his shoulder again. Matthew tucked a piece of his hair behind his ear and stood up a little straighter. Gilbert probably didn't want anything to do with him.

"jasmine sounds fine," Máximo mumbled and placed the rice in the buggy. They moved on to the next aisle. Máximo would pick up food and put them in the cart. He stopped in front of something else and started to compare again. "How do you feel about tacos one night? Hm?" Máximo asked, trying to get Matthew to engage once more.

Matthew never had tacos. So he shrugged.

Máximo tsked his tongue slightly and put the thing in his cart.

"O-oh! Hey!" Gilbert, clearly trying to act like this was all one total coincidence, came sauntering over to them. "Fancy meeting you two here."

Máximo snorted in response. "Seeing how it's the *only* grocery store in town. I'd say it's not exactly 'fancy'."

Gilbert leaned his body against the handle of his cart.

"What do you want, Beilschmidt?" Máximo cut straight to the chase as he grabbed a can off of the shelf and plopped it into the cart without reading it. "Isn't it enough that I had to put up with you for way too long this last week?"

Gilbert coughed slightly. "Just making pleasantries... Birdie? How have you been?" Gilbert questioned as he looked at Matthew.

Matthew just looked away from Gilbert quickly.

"He's not talking to anybody today, much less *you*, get!" Máximo waved his hand like he was shooing a bird away. Gilbert looked unimpressed and did not 'get'.

"Come on, is Máximo being unawesome? Birdie, What's wrong?"

Matthew's mouth twitched a little and he just bit his tongue. He had a few things he wanted to say to Gilbert, a couple of things a little not so nice, but in the end, he decided it was a waste of time and just turned away from Gilbert as a whole.

"Ah. I see." Gilbert sighed out dejectedly.

Give Máximo some credit because he was quick to pick up on the tension in the air. "Did... something happen between you two? And if so when?"

Gilbert blinked in surprise but then quickly pulled back. "It doesn't matter. I... I should just go." Gilbert hesitated for only a second. For that second he stood there looking at the back of Matthew's head before ultimately leaving the aisle with Ludwig in tow.

"Come on, *amigo*, let's just get what we need." Máximo patted Matthew's shoulder and led him along.

Matthew was certain he'd never see Gilbert again after that day. Was he mad at Gilbert? Not really. Okay, maybe a little. Gilbert was having a lot of emotions right now; just like Matthew. Matthew figured he probably ruined their relationship by giving Gilbert the unneeded silent treatment, but unfortunately, everyone was getting this treatment. Máximo, more or less, excluded with one-worded answers mostly.

So, Matthew never in a million years would have guessed the balls-to-the-walls insane move Gilbert would do next.

It was just after dinner. Matthew was helping Máximo clean the dishes. Máximo cleaned and Matthew was on drying duty. Not a word said between them. Once or twice Máximo would shoot a worried glance Matthew's way, but nothing was said. Then, right as they were finishing up, there was a knock at the door.

"Hm?" Máximo turned his head towards the door. He grabbed a nearby towel to dry his wet hands. "Who could that be?" He asked out loud. Matthew knew it couldn't have been for him so he just finished up drying the silverware.

'Why am I having a hard time smiling? I was so cheery the days before- no. I was so ignorant days before.' Matthew thought as he put the silverware in the drawer.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Máximo gruffly asked.

Matthew turned to that direction. The door was open and even though Máximo was blocking most of the way, Matthew recognized the tuft of white hair poking over Máximo's own head and narrowed his eyes. However; it seemed Máximo sensed Matthew coming up on the rear and he, not only pushed Gilbert back, but also stepped into the hallway slamming the door shut behind him.

Matthew huffed at that. The first time that day he wasn't going to be deterred. He put his ear against the door and listened. Thankfully, neither men were exactly quiet. He was sure they didn't even know what the word 'quiet' meant.

"You asked what was wrong between us. I fucked up. Alright. I want to fix things." Gilbert had started his voice almost frantic as he spoke wildly.

"What the hell did you do?!" Máximo snarled.

"I just. I, unawesomely, made a mess of everything. Alright? I just... Máximo. Let me take him out. Properly."

"Absolutely not. I don't like you, I especially don't like you around Matthew!"

"Hey man, have you even *looked* at Matthew today? He looks like hell."

'*Thanks, Gilbert.*' Matthew snorted as he pressed his ear even farther against the door. His ear burned and his heart absolutely raced.

Máximo muttered a response that Matthew couldn't quite make out. It might have been in Spanish.

"C'mon, Máxi, I think Matthew, needs a break. A good and proper break! Let me take him out. I promise you, he'll come back in one piece, untouched. I know you might not think it, but I'm awesome, I won't do a thing to hurt him. I just want to take him dancing."

'*Last time we went dancing it didn't exactly end well.*' Matthew scrunched his nose up. He remembered the loud music and bright lights that caused his senses to go absolutely haywire.

"I'm not letting you take Matt to a damn club!"

"Not a club. Trust me, besides, he's underage, remember? It'd be completely irresponsible of me to do such a thing!"

Matthew almost laughed. Leave it to Gilbert to make him smile for the first time that day. Gilbert was laying it on thick and Matthew never realized how much he missed that sense of humor of Gilbert's. Matthew bit his lower lip with his front teeth and excitedly listened on. Matthew soon realized that he was grinning.

"Why should I trust you? You're a drunk."

"I'm not drunk tonight, am I? Smell my breath-"

"Back off! If you breathe in my face I swear I'm going to get my taser!"

Matthew shut his eyes as a laugh almost came out. He could just imagine Gilbert standing there trying desperately to breathe in Máximo's face to prove his sobriety.

"Why are you doing all of this?" Máximo groaned and Matthew could hear Máximo dragging his hand down his face in irritation. "Why does Matthew, the person that *I'm* responsible for, mean so much to *you* of all people?"

"Because he's awesome!"

"Gilbert. Listen. My *job* is on the line here. I made a promise to keep him safe. If something were to happen to him I'm out of a career. A career I've worked my ass off for. Do you understand that?"

"... I do."

Matthew frowned at this. Máximo had put his job on the line for *him*? Granted Matthew was still clueless on some aspects of human culture, but he for sure knew that this wasn't something humans did lightly. He knew that Máximo liked his job, maybe even loved his job to some degree, and because of that Matthew instantly felt bad. Why was Máximo doing so much for him?

'This just proves it! It proves everything you've been trying to tell dad! Humans aren't all murderers! Most are good and some will even go above and beyond...' Matthew frowned as he was now, more or less, resting his head against the door. His happy feeling only lasted for less than a second when he remembered: His father had been on the land before; his father was the murderer. Not the humans.

"Fine. Do you want to know why he means so much to me? Because I *care* about him. I've cared about him since I first met him. He's different to me, if he were anybody else I would have probably ignored them by now or just let the bridge burn. But a part of me doesn't want to let him go so easily. I know you said to stay away from him, but I can't do that. I just can't."

Matthew blinked in surprise. Was he hearing this right?

"..." Máximo let out a loud sigh and Matthew could hear him shaking his head. Matthew wondered what was going through Máximo's mind right now. Moments passed and Matthew started to grow antsy. "... I want him back by eleven. No later. Do you understand? And if he has so much as a mark on him I'll shoot you in your dick."

"Rea- of course!" It seemed Gilbert was going to question it but backed off before Máximo could change his mind. "But of course. This is if Matthew even wants to go out..."

Realizing they were heading for the door Matthew practically launched himself onto the couch to make it seem like he wasn't eavesdropping. He just got up into a normal sitting position when the door opened. Matthew's heart was racing and he was trying so hard to not let it show. Máximo scratched awkwardly at the base of his chin when he entered.

"Birdie-" Gilbert spoke before Máximo could. "Would you like to go out with me tonight?"

There was a moment when Matthew realized just what he might be agreeing to, but he knew that Gilbert was sober and it seemed that he really wanted to make it up to Matthew. So Matthew thought about what Gilbert had just said and he nodded. "Okay, I'd love to."

"Awesome!"

"Oh! He speaks again!" Máximo joked as he poked the side of Matthew's head playfully. "Now, listen. I'm allowing this, alright? Don't be dumb and stay safe. And you-" Máximo swung around and pointed at Gilbert. "I mean it! I *will* shoot you in the dick if he comes back hurt!"

Gilbert put his hands up in defense quickly. "Understood."

Máximo snorted. "Good. Go, have fun."

"..." The car ride was ungodly quiet. Matthew didn't speak and Gilbert was too tense to speak. Matthew noted that Gilbert was driving out of town and for a moment Matthew wondered what Gilbert had planned for him. It wasn't raining tonight. There would be more rain tomorrow though.

Matthew opened his mouth, but when Gilbert looked at him quickly Matthew shut his mouth and looked away. He didn't know what he was going to say anyway. So, Gilbert kept on driving.

It was maybe ten minutes into this awkward silence did Matthew finally speak. "No, Ludwig?"

"Nah. He has homework to focus on." Gilbert seemed to relax a little after that. "Don't worry, he's a big kid he can take care of himself."

Matthew looked out of the window and watched the houses pass as Gilbert continued to drive on by. As the dusk was starting to settle there weren't a lot of people out, no mostly everyone was in their homes watching TV or eating dinner. "...Have you ever been on the cliff in town?" Gilbert suddenly asked.

"The cliff? No. I've seen it, but I've never been to it." It wasn't a lie. Matthew has seen the large cliff on the east side of the town. He'd seen it from the water. Never thought much of it though. It was just a cliff.

"Well, we're changing that. This place has the *best* view. You'll love it." Gilbert said it with so much confidence that Matthew just couldn't help but believe him. "I just hope we make it in time..." Gilbert muttered the last part as he looked at the clock in his car.

So, Gilbert picked up the speed. Matthew had to reach up and grab onto the handle above his head. Gilbert only laughed at that. "Trust me, Birdie, I'm no speed demon. You do *not* want to be in a car with Lovino."

Matthew didn't know how to respond to that. But he'd just have to take Gilbert's word for it for now.

Gilbert parked his car at the top of the cliff once they got there and together they got out.

Matthew saw exactly what Gilbert meant by it having the best view.

The cliff was overlooking the sea, which was a pretty view in its own right, but the sun was just starting to set. This was casting an orange glow from the sun that illuminated the ocean in the same color as the sky was turning pink making a beautiful contrast between the ocean and the sky. "Wow." Matthew actually breathed out as he leaned in just a bit to get a better look. He knew to mind his footing as the last thing he wanted was to fall. "You're right, this is a view. I've never seen anything like it."

Gilbert smugly smiled at that. "You doubted the awesome me?"

Matthew looked at him and leaned into Gilbert's side. "Not one bit." he playfully bumped his hip into Gilbert's. Gilbert laughed and wrapped his arm around Matthew's shoulder.

"Look, I want to apologize. I realize I may have been rather..."

"-Unawesome?"

"Nah. Just a dick. I was a dick last time we saw each other and I... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried to push you away like that and then ask you to keep quiet about it all. Which, I've seen you have?"

"He doesn't know a thing." Matthew looked out at the ocean. "It seemed luck was on our side that day."

"Nah, more like two children who have a knack for getting in trouble." Gilbert scratched the side of his head. "Still, regardless of it all, I'm going to make it up to you." With that Gilbert took his arm away from Matthew's shoulder and hopped over to the driver's side of the car.

"Oh?" Matthew asked with a raised eyebrow. Gilbert kept his car door open as he fumbled around and turned the car back on. He turned the car lights off but kept the car still running. Matthew heard a few curses escape Gilbert's mouth before the music started up. At first, it was soft, but then Gilbert turned the music up and Matthew was quick to note the music. The music was soft and swaying. No words, no loud bumping music.

"So, do you still want to dance with me?" Gilbert asked as he stood properly and extended a hand out with a playful wink.

"Of course I do." Matthew didn't hesitate to grab Gilbert's hand and with a quick pull in Gilbert soon had Matthew in his arms. They spun first both fast before Gilbert slowed it down to a simple swaying spin. Side to side they swayed and then they'd turn every so often.

Matthew felt his heart absolutely flutter. This. This is the one thing he's wanted to do since becoming human. Being with Gilbert was a plus, a plus Matthew was happy about. He was

sure it wouldn't be the same without Gilbert. Together they swayed to the music and Matthew rested his head on Gilbert's shoulder.

"Gil?"

"Yeah?"

"I prefer this over the club," Matthew whispered and Gilbert laughed out loud.

"Honestly? Same." Gilbert softly spoke and he swayed his upper body from side to side. He lightly pushed Matthew out so he could spin Matthew around. Matthew obliged and twirled out and then spun back into Gilbert's arms. Matthew laughed as he looked up and smiled at Gilbert. Gilbert smiled back. "I just felt rather bad-"

Matthew must have seen his moment because before Gilbert could finish his sentence Matthew pecked Gilbert's lips. Gilbert stopped whatever he was going to say and just let out a startled "Gah!" before turning an interesting shade of red that almost matched his eyes.

"You're forgiven." Matthew shut his eyes and smiled sweetly at Gilbert.

Gilbert, a little awestruck by what just happened, Only managed to wheeze out a simple. "Awesome..."

Matthew really couldn't stop the giggle from leaving his mouth at that.

Gilbert quickly coughed and shook his head in an attempt to lose the blush that stained his cheeks. "Ha! I knew you couldn't stay mad at the awesome me! That's just impossible."

"You are awesome, Gil." Matthew laughed. "And this..." Matthew gestured to the cliff and the, now, darkened sky. He could see the stormy clouds start to roll in once more. "I will admit, was very awesome." Gilbert beamed with pride. Matthew leaned up and pecked Gilbert once again. Which Gilbert did so just the same. A little peck, nothing more. "Thank you. This was honestly just what I needed."

Matthew leaned away from Gilbert now and rested his back against the warm hood of Gilbert's still running car. "Yeah?" Gilbert egged Matthew on for more information. "You looked rather... bummed at the store."

"... It's just with everything that's come to my attention. With my dad, my brothers, the murder, *everything*. I was finding it rather hard to... be happy."

"Yeah... I think your situation would make anybody depressed. At least you didn't result to booze as I had."

"Didn't I though?"

"Not really." Gilbert crossed his arms in a way that each hand was holding on to his elbows. "I was the one that gave you those drinks. I guess if I was going down I wanted to take you with me. Which was a shitty thing to do. I'll admit."

Matthew looked up at the night sky and looked at the stars. They were in such a spot that there was no light pollution from the town. So, the sky was absolutely beautiful. Say for the clouds that threatened to roll in and make more rain. A deep navy blue with billions upon billions of silvery speckled stars gleaming down on the two of them. Matthew wished he could just stay here forever with Gilbert by his side.

"Ivan?" Iryna knocked on her younger brother's office door. She knew he was in there, the walls were made of glass after all, but the knocking was the polite thing to do regardless. In her hands were folders and one newspaper. Inside her chest, her heart absolutely raced as her blood was turning into ice.

"Iryna, what a surprise, and good timing, I was just getting ready to leave." Ivan smiled warmly at her. He grabbed his hat from his desk to prove his point. He could see the night shift crew starting to pile in.

Iryna came in and shut the door behind her. She looked nervous and at that Ivan frowned. "Is something the matter?"

"Well... I had Natalia do some sniffing around... and..." Ivan frowned at this as Iryna sighed and placed everything she had in her arms down on his desk.

Ivan promptly sat his butt down into his chair. "Oh? Sniffing around for what?"

"Matthew... and his brothers." Iryna sat down across from him. "I, as well as everybody else, were rather confused about the age gap. So, I thought to myself: Matthew had to come from *somewhere* right?"

"Right?"

"I thought about what Eduard had told me. A possible kidnapping, so I had Natalia do some digging on missing children over the last eighteen years."

Ivan raised an eyebrow silently urging her to continue.

"Well, that came up as a bust, so I told her to look up lost *twins*. As Matthew did say he had a twin..."

"And?"

Iryna sighed loudly and shook her head. She then grabbed the newspaper. "It's old, but..." She twisted it towards him and slid it across his desk. Ivan kept his eyebrow raised and then glanced down at the paper.

"Eight years ago. In 2012 a big rig fishing boat capsized. There were no survivors. All two hundred and fifty-three fishermen died. This included the captain, his wife... and his *three* boys. Two twin boys, Joseph and Jack: age eight, and the youngest boy; Thomas: age 1."

Ivan stared at the picture in front of him with such intensity that he was afraid his eyes would pop out of their sockets. The picture on the front of the paper was a black and white photo. It

was the last photo of the ship and it's crew still alive.

Front and center was the captain beaming with pride as he held his two twin boys on his hips like they weighed nothing. Next to him was his wife who had a little one-year-old on her hip. The baby seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Even though the picture was black and white, Ivan knew- he *knew* he was looking at little Matthew, resting on the right side of his father; with his head resting into the crook of his father's neck as he shyly smiled at the camera. Ivan finally flickered his eyes up to his sister.

Then she spoke: "Out of all two hundred and fifty-three people on that boat. Only three bodies have yet to ever be recovered. Can you guess which three?"

Chapter End Notes

Y'all!!!!!! Whew! I knew this was something I've had in mind to do since chapter two. Everything will be explained, I absolutely promise this. Now. I actually have a timeline plotted because things are being told out of order which might make it confusing. But I promise I'll do my best to make everything as clear as possible. This is one of the deepest stories I've ever built with the most world building as well!

A house of cards

Lukas groaned out in discomfort. His feet were already hurting despite him only being ten minutes into his shift. "Welcome to the pancake house, my name is Lukas. How may I serve you?" He asked in his usual monotone voice. He hated Saturday mornings. He was always scheduled on a twelve-hour shift and was forced to be a waiter those twelve hours. He'd rather be a busboy than be a waiter. Lukas was *not* a people person.

He loved humans, and he loved being human, but he absolutely loathed being a waiter to humans. He couldn't *wait* to finish college this year and be done with this job.

"I'll have a sweet tea." It was a two-person table and the man, clearly on a date, spoke first.

"And I'll have a coffee with a glass of water, please." The woman told Lukas, he wrote it down.

"A sweet tea and a coffee with water. Anything else?"

"Can I order *you* a personality?" The man laughed at his crude joke.

It took all of Lukas's willpower not to mock- laugh at the man. '*Like I haven't heard that five times today.*' Lukas just turned his heel and turned away after that. He heard the man scoff before telling his date: "Yesh, I think the wall has a better sense of humor than him."

Lukas just snorted as he walked past a couple of other tables. He walked over to the fountain area, where Lovino already was. "Fucking asshole." Lovino immediately cursed as Lukas grabbed two glasses.

"Trouble already?" Lukas asked his coworker. He knew Lovino, but not well. He just knew that Lovino had a temper, a temper that would get him fired one day if he wasn't careful.

"Just some asshat giving me hell because I didn't tell him about some dumbass special."

"Ah, well that's something you should do-"

"- I did." Lovino hissed between his clenched teeth as he poured a cup of coffee. Lukas took the pot once Lovino was finished with it. He started to pour his own cup of coffee. "Not my fault he has shit in his ears." Lovino huffed as he grabbed his drinks to set on a platter. Lukas watched, mildly amused as Lovino's scowl turned into a fake smile and he made his way to the table with his drinks in hand.

Lukas tried to make himself look happier for the customers. *Tried*. Not even his magic could make that possible. It was just the way he was.

Lukas grabbed his three drinks and walked back to the table. "One sweet tea, a coffee, and water." He put the drinks down in front of the two people. "Would you like some creamer?"

"No." The woman bluntly responded.

"Are you guys ready to order?"

"Nah, give us another minute."

"Alright."

"Seriously, are you a mannequin pretending to be human?"

Lukas didn't even hesitate. "No. I'm a merman pretending to be human."

"Yeah, whatever, prick..." The man rolled his eyes and Lukas walked off to give them a few minutes.

He went back and forth between tables, collected tips that rightfully belonged to him, and got everyone their food. Yes, he got many comments on his less than stellar attitude (well, lack thereof) but everyone got what they wanted and he got tips. Granted, some of those tips were pennies, but money was money.

Maybe one day he could lie and say he had a medical condition.

Lukas was walking back over towards the soda fountain when someone caught his attention. This table wasn't his, it was Lovino's. Still they flagged Lukas down for a reason, right?

"Yes?" Lukas asked as he walked over to the family of four. The woman smiled at him politely.

"If it's not too much bother, our waiter seems to have vanished. Could you get him for us? Or better yet, could you get us our check and we'll be on our way?" She politely asked. Lukas could tell by her tone that she once worked in a retail job.

"Of course-" Lukas nodded. "Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you."

So, Lukas almost started to look for Lovino but decided that would waste more time and these people clearly wanted to leave. So, he went to the register and found their table. It took him just a few minutes to print out the check. He then walked back and placed it on the table.

"Thank you." The woman grinned at him. Lukas gave her a nod. With that, she and her family got up to pay for their food. They left a tip on the table but Lukas didn't touch it.

"Now, where did Lovino go?" Lukas hummed to himself and started for the breakroom. He figured that maybe Lovino went to take a small break and lost track of the time? It sounded reasonable and a lot like Lovino. So, Lukas went to the breakroom-

Well, it wasn't much of a breakroom. Just a small corner of the kitchen by the alley door where, unfortunately, more than one person goes to take a smoke break. (making sure they breathed the smoke out the door of course.) But no Lovino.

Lukas crossed his arms. Maybe Lovino just up and quit? Wouldn't surprise Lukas, Lovino hated this job. So, Lukas just shrugged. He'll talk to the manager about it later, for now, he had patrons to get to.

As he passed by the cook he grabbed the plates he knew were for a certain table of his. He started putting them on a tray to take to the customers. He picked the tray up with one hand and started out of the kitchen.

He delivered the food without incident and went to his next table when he caught sight of dark brown hair sauntering past him. "There you are." He commented to Lovino.

"Sorry, I just had to talk to someone..." Lovino huffed a little as he walked up to Lukas.

"Lawyer?"

"Nah, The guy who found my little brother the other day." Lovino walked with Lukas. To make themselves look busy they both decided to mindlessly clean off an empty table. Lovino laughed a little. "I know next to nothing about you-"

"-Same to you." Lukas grabbed the plates while Lovino started to grab the empty cups.

"-Still, I won't lie, Lukas. I'm a little surprised at you. I didn't take you as a two-timer."

Lukas almost dropped his plates. "Excuse me?" He breathed out in shock. He knew Lovino to be rude, but this was just... hurtful and untrue! "I'm not even dating one person, let alone two." Lukas made sure he had a better grip on the plates. Together they started back towards the kitchen to set the plates by the sink for the dishwasher to clean.

"Oh, please, everyone knows you're dating Andersen."

"Well, *everyone* is wrong. He's just a..." Lukas paused for a moment. A roommate? A friend? The man that gave him a chance when nobody else would? "He's a nice guy. And a good friend." They dropped the plates off by the sink.

"Sure, well regardless of all of that bullshit that you just said. The guy I was just talking to told me to give you *this*." Lovino smugly pulled out a small box. It was a flat box one would expect a gift card to be in. "Huh? Are you seeing someone then?"

"I just told you I'm not." Lukas grabbed the box. "Did you get a name?-"

"Hey!" The manager came around the corner. "If you have time to lean; you have time to clean!" He snapped at the two of them.

Lovino let out a loud "bah!" Before walking off, the manager followed right behind him. Lukas looked at the box. It was flat, as mentioned, and it had the design of a Christmas present the ends of the box were taped down. He rattled it out of instinct. Something inside rattled around it sounded semi-heavy.

Lukas put the box over the nearby trashcan ready to just throw it out and just paused. With an eye roll he peeled off the tape. Some of the design went with the tape. Once it was free he

slipped the box open.

He then frowned as he grabbed what was inside the box. A cross. It was really a hairpin in the shape of a cross. "God. I was afraid of this."

"Whoa! What is that?" Marius showed his finding to the other two of the trio. Arthur swam up to the small cross and looked at it forwards and backwards. "It's shiny. I think it's a human object..."

"Oh! I know! Humans wear this on their fingers!" Arthur suddenly exclaimed as he snatched it from Marius's grip. To prove his point he opened the end and tried to snap it on his finger, but it didn't work. In fact, it just pinched Arthur's skin. "Ow." Arthur huffed as he looked at it. "Is it broken?"

This time Lukas took it. "Maybe it goes on their clothing?"

"Maybe." Marius shrugged now growing bored. "Humans are weird. I swear they like shiny stuff more than we do."

Marius and Arthur then swam off, clearly uninterested in the object now. Lukas examined it for a few minutes. On the back was something that moved up and down. When it moved up a small part opened up, when it went down it closed. Lukas didn't know why this fascinated him, but it did. He wanted this thing, but he didn't own any clothing to put it on.

"Maybe?" He reached up, popped it open, and attached it to his hair, then he popped it closed. It stayed put. This excited him more than it should have "Guys!" He raced over to them. They weren't that far ahead of him.

"Mate, you're gonna make yourself a target with that thing attached to you like that." Arthur swam up to Lukas and got a closer look at the cross.

"Hm. I think it suits him. Besides, he has magic, remember?" Marius pointed out. Arthur didn't seem too impressed and crossed his arms.

"Fine, but when a shark bites your arm off don't come crying to me, because I won't be the one to heal you."

Lukas sighed as he twirled the cross between his fingers. This was clearly a warning of sorts. Marius was on the land and wanted him to know it. "I thought I lost this forever..." He couldn't help but breathe out. He lost it when...

Well, when he made the announcement that he was leaving the ocean for good. Marius didn't exactly take the news well. Then again, neither did Arthur.

The very first human thing he owned. Looking back on it now: Lukas realized that this object might have been the starting domino to fall.

"Lukas!" The manager roared his name. "Get back to work before I write you up!"

Lukas opened the hairpin and properly put it in his hair. "I'm coming." He called back to his boss.

Eduard yawned loudly as he walked into the police station. It was almost six am and he was *not* fully awake yet. He held his coffee desperately in his hand. It was an elixir from the gods during these early morning hours.

Eduard needed to be there early today. He had no clue why, but Ivan told him it was important that he came in before seven. This was never good news.

When Eduard turned the corner he nearly dropped his coffee. "T-Tino?"

His dear friend Tino was sitting at Eduard's door. He looked like he was dressed ready for work in his khaki's, matching colored shoes, white pressed iron shirt with his favorite green sweater vest over it. He also looked exhausted. Dark circles under his eyes and his hair was an absolute mess. He had also been crying- no scratch that- he was crying right now as fresh tears stained his face.

Tino looked at Eduard and sniffled. "H-Hi." Tino greeted weakly. It was clear that he was *trying* to sound happy, but he was failing. Miserably. Tino sniffled again and, rather childishly, wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Eduard quickly snapped out of shock and frowned. "None of that now, Tino. Come on." He placed his coffee down and offered his hand to his friend. Tino graciously took it and Eduard helped him up to his feet. "There we go." Eduard lightly dusted off Tino's shoulders. "Clearly you need to talk."

Tino just nodded and Eduard unlocked his door. "Please, tell me what's on your mind?"

They walked in, Eduard's beloved coffee left behind on the floor outside of his office. Eduard sat Tino down on the couch and he rifled through his desk drawers for tissues.

"The s-school, they changed the field trip last minute." Tino hiccuped before sniffling again. Eduard stopped his search for a moment as his mind reeled. Why would that upset Tino so much that he had to come here?

"Oh?" He found an unopened pack of tissues, the little pack of ten that one could get for a dollar. He offered it to Tino. Who took it, tore into it, and took one out to wipe his damp and sore eyes. Tino nodded wordlessly and blew his nose loudly.

"The trip was originally for the philharmonic. The one at the next town over?"

"Yes, I know of it."

Tino hiccuped. "But... I don't know.. Something happened and they changed it... Eduard, they changed it to a... a boat! A fishing boat of all things! They want the children to learn about the sea life!"

"Oh shit." Eduard couldn't stop himself from cursing. "Well, obviously you can't chaperone this trip. The school board knows your... history." He treaded lightly. If he said the wrong thing he knew he'd regret it.

Tino shook his head. "They're holding me to it... I told them I volunteered for the Philharmonic, but they won't listen. They said if I don't do it they'll suspend me without pay..." Tino sniffled loudly and wiped his eyes once more. "I... I tried to explain to them why it's a bad idea... do you know what they said?"

"Obviously, I don't, Tino."

"They said that 'Yes, what happened to you was a tragedy, but rest assure all of the students will be wearing life vests as... as... Sven should have been....'. " Tino let out a heart-shattering wail as his whole body shook.

"Jesus Christ." Eduard sat next to Tino on the couch in a heartbeat. Professionalism be damned at this point as Tino was his friend after all. "Please tell me you're exaggerating that last part."

Tino continued to cry loudly as he shook his head.

Eduard wrapped his arms around Tino's shoulders and pulled him into a hug. Normally Eduard wasn't one for physical affection and knew better than to touch the patients, but this was *Tino*. And Tino was his friend.

"How many times have I told you to quit that job, Tino? This is clearly a sign."

"I would trust me-" Tino looked up and wiped his watering eyes with the palm of his hand. "- But Berwald is hardly making any money with his furniture carving business- fucking thanks, Wal-Mart!" Tino spat the last part out like Wal-Mart had personally harmed him. "If it weren't for my teaching job we'd lose the house." Tino swallowed hard as he moved to shift away from Eduard. Tino pulled a clean tissue out of the pack to wipe his eyes with. "I just... how could they say *that*? I... I'm not... I'm not a horrible parent am I- I mean. Eduard, I looked away for just a *moment*."

"Of course you weren't. I've personally seen you with Sven. You were a great parent, you and Berwald both."

"I'm telling you. He was *grabbed*."

"Tino, please not this again-"

"He was! He had to be!" Tino's voice cracked as he yelled out so loud that Eduard was sure the people in the bullpen could hear him.

"A rip-tide- I was a *Marine*! I know what a rip-tide is. There's no way it- it caused him to *vanish* like that." Tino was practically begging Eduard to believe him. Eduard put both of his hands on Tino's shoulders.

"Look at me."

Tino sniffled but did as instructed.

"It hurts, I know, and denial is a very real part of healing and accepting what happened. No shark could swim out to where he was and there were no other people around when it happened. He was taken by a powerful rip-tide. There was nothing more you could have done."

Tino whimpered as his breath hitched painfully in his chest. "It's not fair... he was only ten!" Tino growled out. "He was just a baby- *he was my baby!*" Tino wailed once again. Eduard patted Tino's back. Tino pressed his face into Eduard's chest and whimpered pitifully. "I miss him so much, Berwald- Berwald misses him so much as well. Just the other day... I saw him staring at the picture in the hallway again..." Tino hiccuped as he brought his head up to Eduard's shoulder. "He stared at it for almost an hour. I know he didn't want me to see it, but... he was crying again..."

Eduard sighed as he rubbed circles against Tino's back. "It'll be alright," Eduard whispered softly.

Tino let his neck go slack against the crook of Eduard's neck. He rested his head before speaking softly again. "... I'm glad we have Peter now. He's helping the ache fade a little every day."

Eduard tensed so hard that he *knew* Tino felt it. He knew a Peter- well... He didn't *know* a Peter, no, *Matthew* knows a Peter. "P-Peter?" Eduard finally asked. He tried to sound nonchalant.

Tried.

Tino, oblivious to it all at this point and time, nodded weakly. He moved away from Eduard "Yeah. He found us, surprisingly. He just... showed up with Berwald's glasses in his hands about two weeks ago. He's been... a god sent." Tino whispered those words softly. He then chuckled as he smiled at the memory.

"He showed up naked, said he didn't have any clothes... no clothes, no parents. It almost seemed too perfect, you know? I was worried there for a minute but Andersen reassured me, Peter wasn't a missing kid." Tino gasped out shakily. " Sweet boy, really he is. I've been teaching him how to read and write..."

"..." Eduard didn't respond as he stared intensely at the leather on his couch. He felt his blood turn cold as he looked at Tino. Eduard was pretty sure he was shaking at this point. "A... and you're sure his name is *Peter*?"

"That's what he told me," Tino told Eduard as he tilted his head. "Is something wrong?"

"Tino?"

"Yes?" Tino looked up at Eduard innocently. Eduard swallowed hard. He was at a crossroad and each side was... bad.

"...You should really talk to the school board about how this Principle has been treating you." Eduard finally reached up and with a shaking hand swept some of Tino's hair out of his eyes. "It's highly unprofessional. Moreover, why haven't you been telling Berwald this? Ah!-" Tino opened his mouth to protest but Eduard stopped him. "-None of that. I know you, Tino. You've been keeping this... *bullying* quiet."

"Oh, you know I love Berwald, but if I tell him he'd just scare the Principal, and it wouldn't be the first time... especially if I tell him what that *kusipää* told me. Berwald would *murder* him."

"... you make a valid point, I suppose... you should get going, Tino. It's almost seven. The kids will be waiting for you."

"Yeah... thank you, Eduard... I mean it."

"No problem. Just remember. It hurts, yes, but it'll be better as time goes on." Eduard stood. Tino sniffled, blew his nose one last time, and stood up as well.

"I know."

Eduard watched Tino go, taking the pack of tissues with him. Eduard let out a low sigh once Tino was out of sight and he sunk into his couch. "Unbelievable..." Eduard groaned. "Of all the parents in all the world..." He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "... What am I going to tell Ivan?"

Tino was scary. But Chief Ivan Braginsky? Nightmare fuel.

Máximo hummed as he walked into the bathroom to collect the laundry. It was a bright and early six AM Saturday morning. Máximo always made it a habit to get up extra early on Saturday to get his laundry done, now it was more important as he had Matthew living with him. Also, something was *smelling* and he had to figure out what it was.

Matthew was still sleeping and Máximo had to say he was impressed. True to his word: Gilbert returned Matthew at eleven pm sharp last night. Not a scratch on him as promised and Matthew definitely seemed a lot happier, which was also a plus, a plus that made Máximo think. Maybe he should ask Eduard or Irnya to back off with the questions. They aren't getting anywhere anyway.

Máximo picked up the basket and put it next to his dirty towels on the ground next to the closet in the kitchen. It wasn't just any closet, once one opened the doors they were met with a stackable washer and dryer. Obviously.

Next to the washer and dryer combo was his laundry soap and fabric softener. Máximo was a simple man, a simple man who's mama would scold him for not separating his whites from his colors. Or even separating his jeans from his shirts.

One by one Máximo picked the item out and tossed it into the drum of the washing machine. He stopped when he got to one of Matthew's pants. It smelt. Like vomit. Did Matthew throw

up? When? With a sigh, Máximo shook his head and threw the pants into the washing machine. Clearly this was something they'd have to talk about. At least he found the source of the smell.

Máximo reached into the laundry basket and paused when he pulled out a black shirt. *'This... isn't mine.'* He thought as he inspected the shirt for a moment. It was too small to be his. *'Then it's Matthew's-'* Máximo stopped himself from throwing the shirt into the laundry. He felt his lips turn down into a frown. He didn't remember buying a black shirt for Matthew. Máximo felt he was being silly, but still, the shirt was inside out....

So, he turned it outright.

Rammstein the shirt read in familiar scratchy writing, but not just that, but the print was cracked and faded to boot showing wear and tear. No, Máximo did *not* buy Matthew this shirt...

But he knew of a certain Prussian that had this shirt and worn it multiple times around Máximo. In fact if his memory served him right: Máximo arrested Gilbert in this very shirt one time.

So that begs the question. Why does Matthew have it? And when did he obtain it?

Máximo full-on scowled. He took note that the shirt seemed to be covered in glitter. In fact, the glitter was starting to stick to the palms of Máximo's hands. *'Glitter...'* Máximo scrunched his nose up and stood up. The shirt still clenched tightly in his hand.

He tried to rack his brain, when did Matthew even slip away from him to go and hang out with Gilbert? Well, aside from yesterday that was.

'The door was unlocked a couple of days ago, that was odd- yeah, but that was probably my fault after all didn't I forget to lock it back- and it was locked when I got back...' Máximo frowned as he looked at Matthew on the couch.

He looked peaceful, one arm over his head while the other arm dangled off the end of the couch.

'I'm not the one with a hangover... I'M not the one with a hangover.' Gilbert's voice rang back into Máximo's head. Máximo sucked on his teeth. He's being stupid, Matthew? Drinking? Ha!...

'I fucked up, alright, I just want to make things right!' Gilbert's voice rang through Máximo's head. Máximo found himself clutching the shirt with shaking hands.

Máximo then snorted, he should just wake Matthew and ask him about it. He was sure there was a simple explanation behind this shirt. Like maybe Gilbert just gave the shirt to Matthew-

'-Because he threw up on his actual shirt. That's why his pants smelt that way and why this glitter infested thing doesn't smell as bad. I bet his pants are covered in glitter as well.'

Máximo narrowed his eyes and he turned to the pile of Matthew's shirts. Máximo stalked over to the pile and rifled through them. He recognized all of these shirts as ones that *'Yes, these are the shirts I bought him... except for one.'* Máximo didn't know which shirt was missing, but there was in fact a shirt missing, replaced by this one.

Maybe it was the cop in Máximo or maybe it was something else, but he was starting to figure out a scene. A scene he didn't like. He gave one last look to the black shirt and sighed.

'My head hurts, and my stomach is sour.'

Was Matthew saying that because he hadn't eaten? Or was he saying that because he was hungover from going out and partying with Gilbert behind Máximo's back.

With his teeth clenched Máximo knew what his answer was. But he wasn't sure, no.

So, with no remorse, he shook Matthew awake.

Matthew snorted at the sudden motion and sat up. "Huh?!" Matthew blinked in panic as he frantically grabbed his glasses from the floor. "What's happening?" He looked at Máximo with a panicked look. His chest rose and fell as it was clear that Máximo had woken him with a start.

Máximo simply held the shirt up to Matthew. "Care to explain this?"

Matthew blinked, at first he looked confused, and then Máximo saw it in Matthew's eyes. A spark before his face crumpled a bit. He was caught and Matthew knew this. "I can..." Matthew sighed.

"When? How? And what did you and Gilbert do?!"

Matthew's eyes shifted for a moment as he tried to sit up a little bit more. "Gilbert wasn't-

"Don't! Do not lie to me, Matthew! I'm not an idiot!" Máximo snarled and Matthew shrunk back a bit. "You don't think I don't recognize that bastard's clothes?!"

"Okay! Yes, we were together but I swear nothing happened-"

"What happened?!"

Matthew opened his mouth, desperate and slightly scared, nothing came out as he blinked a few times, his mind unable to think of anything to say at this minute. He never had Máximo speak to him in such a tone before, not even his father yelled at him like that.

"When?" Máximo got close to Matthew's face.

"...A about a week ago... y-you were sleeping. He came to the window... I just..." Matthew breathed heavily. "Please, Máximo, it was just a mistake. Gilbert was drunk-"

"Did you drink?"

"I-"

"Did you drink?!" In a moment of anger, Máximo threw the shirt at Matthew causing Matthew to yelp out, more in fear than in pain.

"Yes! I drank!" Matthew told the truth. "I-" he knew if he told the truth that maybe it would calm Máximo down, yes? That's how it usually was when his father got angry with him. "-I didn't even know I was drinking alcohol!"

That-

That was the wrong thing to say.

Máximo's face went from enraged to *murderous*. "I see..."

"Don't-" Matthew got up quickly. "Máximo! Don't hurt him!" He grabbed on to Máximo's arm in an attempt to stop him. Matthew was quickly flung to the floor. "He apologized!" Matthew shot back up to his feet. "He knew what he did was wrong! That's why he wanted to make it up to me last night! I swear-" Matthew got in front of the door and blocked it off. He kept his arms outstretched in an attempt to just get Máximo to stop for just a second. "Please just *listen to me!*"

"Why should I?! You didn't even bother to tell me this! What were you just going to keep this a secret!?"

"Please! Just listen! Gilbert was drunk when he took me out, Okay, I shouldn't have gone with him! I know this! It was stupid of me. I'll openly admit this-" Máximo tried to shift around Matthew, but Matthew shifted to the same side as Máximo and kept himself in front of the door.

"Move-"

"No! Listen to me, dammit! Gilbert messed up-"

"Oh no, he did more than that. Matthew-" Máximo grabbed Matthew's wrist and physically pulled him away from the door. Matthew yelped again, this time in pain. "You're underage! What he did was downright illegal! What's worse?! Matthew, he could have *hurt you!* Are you not understanding this!?"

"But he didn't! Are you not understanding *that!* He didn't! Máximo! He flipped out when he saw me with him!" Matthew desperately yelled as tears started to prick at the edge of his eyes. "Please... Don't hurt him. If you're mad, be mad at *me!* I snuck out after all."

Máximo sucked in a slow and deep breath. He wasn't aware of how tightly he had Matthew's wrist in his grip. It wasn't until he was aware that Matthew was shaking and Máximo could feel the bones of Matthew's wrist grind painfully against his hand did it click.

Máximo was pissed, yes, but he had let his temper get the better of him. And judging by the painful face Matthew was trying (and failing) to hide, he was hurting Matthew as a result.

With a deep breath, Máximo let go of Matthew. Matthew rubbed his wrist and stared at the ground.

"I'm sorry." Matthew choked out as he just kept his gaze to the ground. "I... I-" Matthew used his left hand to move his hair out of his face. "I really am. Just please, don't hurt Gilbert..."

"...I'm leaving. I need to clear my head- don't follow me." Máximo snarled before he left his apartment; slamming the door behind him.

"My, My. What drama." Marius hummed as he swam around his cave, his *home* unfortunate as it was. He didn't have a nice wide open space that Arthur had, but then again, nobody knew where to find him, so this spot would have to do.

Marius watched the people. He loved to use his magic to spy on people, he honestly never thought of using it on the town, but this has come in handy. He was spying, waiting, getting the information he needed.

Marius was basically making a house of cards. He knew this, any minute his grand plan could unfold and collapse, but that would be fine. He could always rebuild the house with different cards if needed. Or even... go back to stealing cards from someone else one at a time. But as of right now... the cards were fitting perfectly in their place.

A soft cough caught Marius's attention and silently he swam up to Petru. "Hey, buddy," he whispered to his little brother. Petru opened his eyes for just a moment before drifting off to sleep once more. "*Damnit Arthur...*" Marius thought as he quietly petted Petru's hair. His brother was dying. Marius was doing everything he could to keep him alive.

He found a small counteract to the curse placed on his baby brother. The souls of children. As unfortunate and as morbid as it was. It worked and for a year Petru would be back up and swimming around, but when the summer came... It was time for a new soul. Arthur and Liam both knew of this and tried to stop him, but they were never able to.

But if this new plan of his worked... then maybe he'd collect enough souls for ten years or even... hopefully reverse the curse with Peter's own soul if he could be that lucky. '*But would it even work with Peter's soul? Peter is- uh- was human...*' This question kept popping into Marius's mind.

Marius silently swam around his brother and looked back at his portal. He already knew where everyone was. This is what he loved about his magic.

He was sure Arthur had done the same thing when sending Liam up to the surface. '*Perfect. Arthur is doing amazing. Exactly what I'd hope he'd do. I just gotta keep Arthur distracted with his missing children so I can pull my strings...*' Marius frowned for just a second before swallowing his sudden sadness down.

Now the question was... how was he going to do this right? He had so many places to start the question was... where!? Well... he knew where he really wanted to start, but Marius wasn't an idiot. He waved his hand and watched Lukas walk around that 'job' of his.

Oh, he got Marius's gift it seemed.

No, Lukas wasn't dumb and, though a little weaker in magic, was still a force to be reckoned with. If Marius wanted to get to Lukas then... he'd have to get to Andersen first...

And that shouldn't be too hard.

None of that

"Peter's hiding something," Berwald spoke, his mouth full of toothpaste. Tino stood next to his husband in the bathroom brushing his own teeth. There was no threat of Peter hearing this conversation as the bathroom was in their own bedroom.

"Of course he is." Tino spat into the sink before going back to brushing. "I w'rk wit' k'ds, Berw'ld.-" Tino spat again. "Most kids, especially ten-year-olds are very open about their lives, but Peter? What do we know about him?"

Berwald sighed and then spat into the sink.

"Exactly. That and the whole thing with Lukas... I'm not dumb, Berwald. They know each other and they don't want us to know."

"But why?"

Tino shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know... then again, I guess that begs the question... what do we really know about Lukas?"

There was a silence between the duo as they thought on that question. They've known Lukas for almost six years and, well, they knew almost nothing of his past.

Tino sighed out once more and placed his toothbrush in the cup by the sink. "You know? Maybe he's just scared."

"Lukas?"

"Peter, Berwald." Tino came up and quietly attached himself to Berwald. "We don't know what he's been through, but I think I can confidently say that he chose us for a reason. Right?"

Berwald nodded against Tino's head. "Why don't you take him to the store tomorrow? Try and get him to open up a little more if you can."

"So whatcha need to get here anyway?" Peter questioned as he walked with Berwald. Tino couldn't come with them as he had to work. Peter unconsciously slipped his hand into Berwald's as they continued down the store aisle together.

Berwald's hand went limp for just a second before he gently squeezed Peter's hand.

"Chisels."

"Oh... what for? And What are chisels?"

Berwald's mouth twitched a little. "For my furniture carving. Mine are getting dull." Berwald explained as they turned down an aisle.

"Ohhhh. So you make the stuff in the house? Like the couch?"

"Yes, I made that, and I sell them for money."

"Can I help you one day?"

"Mmm. I don't know about that. Chisels are sharp." Berwald turned to look at the selection of chisels in front of him. "But you could watch me if you'd like."

"Okay, that sounds fun."

Berwald picked up a chisel and lightly scraped his thumb over it. It seemed sharp enough. It had a beveled edge which is just what he needed. Peter's hand suddenly slipped out of Berwald's. Berwald looked over at Peter to see him looking at the tools behind them. "Look Peter. Don't touch." Berwald instructed when he saw Peter try to reach up and grab a hammer.

Peter let out a soft "eh." of disappointment but complied with Berwald's command. Berwald went back to looking at the chisels. He looked at a different brand and ran his thumb over the end to test its sharpness.

"That movie last night was so scary!"

"I told you, Alfred-san, we could have turned it off if you were scared-"

"I totally wasn't scared!"

Berwald raised an eyebrow at the, rather loud, voice yelling from the next aisle down. He just shook his head and picked out a chisel that would work best for him. "Peter?" Berwald looked over his shoulder. Peter was still standing there looking at the hammers- or rather the wall behind the hammers. His body language seemed to have become tense and almost rigid with fear. "Are you alright?"

"Never better, did you get what you neededweshouldgonow-" Peter spoke so rapidly as it almost seemed like he was trying to push Berwald down the aisle.

"Uh-"

Peter stopped his pushing instantly as a new voice spoke from the other side of the aisle.

"Ah!" Peter actually squeaked in fear. Berwald rose an eyebrow at this and instantly he put a hand on Peter's shoulder as he turned around.

Then came the silence.

Berwald narrowed his eyes as the two men stared.

The first man with black hair didn't seem too interested in Peter, in fact, he was focusing more on his partner.

His partner in question was taller than Berwald, his hair almost the exact same shade of blonde as Peter's. His eyes the same color as blue and almost the same shape. If Berwald didn't know any better he honestly would have thought that they were brothers, but Peter assured him and Tino that he had no other siblings.

The blonde man on the other end of the aisle was clearly staring directly at Peter. His eyes were narrowed, and his brow was furrowed downwards.

Peter let out a soft "ah..." and reached up to touch both of Berwald's hands. Peter's hands were cold and rather shaky.

While the stranger let out another "uh..."

Berwald pulled Peter closer to his body. He let out a low growl from his throat as he glared at the man. Berwald knew didn't need his words to be threatening, according to Tino he could be scary just by glaring.

"...I don't think we need anything from this aisle, Kiku!" The man quickly flipped his switch. If he was scared he didn't let it show as he urged the other away from the aisle.

"Weirdo..." Berwald growled as he let his hands drop from Peter's shoulders. "Did you know him?"

Peter frowned slightly as they got back to walking. "Kinda...I really just wasn't expecting him, that's all."

Berwald took note of Peter's shaken tone. '*Abusive foster parents? Sounds plausible...*' and decided not to question it too much, in fear of scaring Peter too much. Instead, he stopped his walking and got down on one knee so he was Peter's height. He then put a hand on Peter's shoulder. "Peter."

"Hm?"

Berwald paused as he thought about how he was going to do this. Tino was usually the good one with words, not him. "If you're ever scared of somebody. Don't be afraid to tell Tino or me."

"Okay. I wasn't really scared of that man. I just wasn't expecting to see him." Peter confessed.

"And that's okay, but I'm saying this for your own good as well. If you ever feel threatened by *anybody* you come to me or Tino. We just want to make sure you're safe."

Peter nodded a little slowly and smiled up at Berwald. "Understood."

Berwald smiled and stood up. Once he was up on his feet Peter slipped his hand into his again. Peter's hand was still cold, but now no longer shaking, and Berwald was going to take that as a win for the time being.

Máximo had every intention on breaking down Gilbert's door and beating him to a bloody pulp. But he couldn't do it. He marched right up to Gilbert's door and just paused. He couldn't pound on the door. Quietly he just pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a few Spanish curses. Eventually, he just walked back to his car and sat in it for a few moments.

Silently Máximo twiddled his thumbs and leaned back into his seat. He wished he would have brought his phone with him, but unfortunately, he left that behind-

There was a knock at his window.

'If it isn't the man himself.' Máximo thought as he rolled his window down and Gilbert poked his head through the window. He didn't look impressed.

"Why are you stalking me?" Gilbert asked in a rather deadpanned voice.

"Why are *you* taking Matthew out to a club?" Máximo asked in the same tone. He was doing all he could to keep his head level right now.

Gilbert's mouth twitched, his eyes rolled, and then he opened the passenger door and got into the car. "You're either brave or dumb to be coming into *my* car," Máximo commented.

"Matthew told you-"

"No, I found out on my own. You gave him a *Rammstein* shirt, dipshit. Of course, I would put two and two together." Máximo grumbled before he shook his head.

"I see. Let me explain before you tear my head off my shoulders, *ja?*"

"You got three minutes." Máximo looked at the clock in his car.

Seconds passed and Gilbert didn't speak right away. Instead, he looked out the car window and then shut his eyes. "I let my emotions get the best of me when it happened. Instead of dealing with them, like an adult, I decided to stifle them down with booze. A lot of booze, the most booze I've drunk since... well, I don't know when. Francis's death... the guy was like a brother to me. So, you have to know that his death honestly hurt me in a way that almost mirrored my father's death." Gilbert sighed and brought his leg up onto the seat so he could hug his knee.

"Okay, I get it. You had a depressive episode and you chose to drown it in alcohol, but why did you bring Matthew down with you?" Gilbert didn't answer. Instead, he just looked out the windshield again. Máximo tapped his fingers against his steering wheel. "Will, Ludwig be alright by himself for a while?"

"Well, he's at school, so..."

"Okay. We're going for a ride."

"...Not to the station, right?"

"Do I look like I'm in uniform, Beilschmidt?"

"Okay, as long as you aren't here to arrest me."

Máximo rolled his eyes, started the car, and drove off down the road. There was silence between them as Máximo just simply drove. He drove through the town, down past the station, and then eventually stopped in front of his apartment complex. Gilbert's mouth turned down in a frown when Máximo parked.

"What's going on?"

"C'mon, I feel like Matthew should be here as well. I have words for both of you." Máximo softly spoke as he undid his seatbelt and opened his car door. Gilbert shrugged and just went along with it. He got up and out of the car, gently shutting the car door behind him.

Gilbert shoved his hands into his pocket and frowned as a gentle breeze swept by him. With the breeze came the salty scent of the ocean that was nearby.

Máximo quickly jogged up the stairs, he could hear Gilbert behind him. Máximo went up to the door and opened it, it was unlocked; how he left it.

Silently he went inside, and he just stood in the doorway. Matthew wasn't there. Máximo frowned as he took a step inside of his apartment. Máximo scanned around for several seconds. *'I messed up, and now he's gone.'* Máximo thought sadly. His moment of sadness was quickly squashed when the sound of the sink in the bathroom turned on before the bathroom door opened.

Matthew stepped out of the bathroom and blinked when he saw Máximo and Gilbert.

"Oh, you're back. Look, I'm sorry-"

"-Birdie, save it, if anyone should apologize, it should honestly be me-" Gilbert tried to step in but Máximo put his hands up silencing both of them.

"Matthew-" Máximo started with a soft breath. "-I'm glad you're still here."

Matthew tilted his head in confusion. "You told me not to leave. I knew better than to disobey you again!"

"Right, and I'm sorry. But the three of us need to sit down and have a conversation, a well-needed one. Like adults and I'll try and keep my temper in check this time around." He looked at Gilbert as he said this. Máximo then ushered the two of them to the couch. They sat, and Máximo chose to sit on the coffee table. It creaked but didn't give way to his weight.

Máximo didn't know where to start. So, he started with the obvious. "You two care for each other, anybody with functioning eyeballs can see it." He swallowed. "But what you two did was not only stupid but borderline idiotic as well. Gilbert, you took him to a *club* and secretly served him booze on top of it! Do you realize that if you were caught you could have gone to prison? Drinking and driving, kidnapping, and underage drinking! You could have lost Ludwig, your job, everything."

Gilbert looked ready to make some sort of snappy comeback; probably one along the lines of 'you aren't my dad.' but Matthew lightly tapped Gilbert's arm with the back of his hand; keeping Gilbert in check. Gilbert chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Yeah, I know... I really don't know what drunk me was thinking..." he grumbled in response. "Look, I really don't plan on getting that crazy again. Trust me, finding Matthew in my bed was a bit of a wake-up call along with Ludwig going missing."

Máximo narrowed his eyes. "But nothing happened, right?"

"Nothing happened." Matthew sighed.

"Not a thing." Gilbert shrugged his shoulders.

Máximo let out a sigh of relief. "That's good, but now. You, Matthew, surely you know what you did was *wrong* right?"

Now it was Matthew's turn to bite the inside of his cheek and shrink. "Of course I know it was wrong... I just... when I was with my dad I never got to see things and when Gilbert offered... I just didn't want to turn it down." Matthew let out a sigh and started to fidget with his fingers. "But trust me, I won't be doing that again any time soon. I learned that lesson." Matthew made a disgusted face at the memory of his hangover.

Máximo sucked in a slow and deep breath. "Look, I'm not going to go all crazy, I... just need to know that you two will never do something as dumb as this again- I mean, not while Matthew is still living in my house. Once Matthew learns what he needs too and is of drinking age, I won't care." Máximo clarified. Both men nodded in understanding.

For Máximo it was like a small weight was lifted. "Great. Now that that is out of the way. I feel boundaries are in order, *si*?" He straightened up a bit.

Gilbert made a face causing Matthew to laugh a little.

"Now, I feel like asking you two not to see each other is like asking the sea to stop its waves. So, I guess, I don't mind if you start dating, but *but*, I want you back by eleven at the latest." He pointed at Matthew.

Matthew nodded with a small smile on his face. "Understandable."

"Fair enough." Gilbert winked at Matthew and Matthew smiled.

"No more sneaking up to my house in the dead of night, that right there will get you shot Beilschmidt and-"

Máximo never got to say his third rule as there was a knock on his door. Máximo got up to answer it. While he did that Matthew leaned in and whispered something in Gilbert's ear. Whatever Matthew said it wasn't bad as it made Gilbert chuckle. "What happened here?" He heard Gilbert say but didn't get to see as he opened the door.

Andersen was standing there, decked out in full cop gear. He was on the clock.

"Andersen? Why are you here?" Máximo frowned as he tilted his head at Andersen in question.

Andersen let out an annoyed grunt. " 'Cause, you can't answer your damn phone. Ivan, Emma, and I have been calling you like crazy." He muttered and then let himself inside the apartment.

Andersen's eyes stopped on Matthew, who was peeking up over the couch to look at him, but then his eyes shifted to Gilbert.

"What's so important?"

Andersen looked back at Máximo. "They wouldn't tell me all of the details, just that you're needed back at the station ASAP, Matthew too. From what I've managed to gather there's not just been a big breakthrough in Matthew's case-"

"-Case?" Matthew inquired but his answer was never acknowledged as Andersen kept speaking to

Máximo.

"But your brother is at the station. Just waltzed in looking for you."

"This is great is it Alfred?! Or is it Peter!?" Matthew hopped over the couch in an instant. Gilbert now forgotten. Máximo studied Andersen's face closely. The mention of Peter made Andersen grimace.

It seemed Andersen couldn't even look at Matthew as he turned his head to face Máximo. "He says his name is Liam."

Matthew's face absolutely dropped. He turned pale as he just stared at the carpet now. He spoke only two words. In a grave tone that sounded unnatural coming out of his mouth. "Oh no."

Arthur sighed as he sat on the bow of the ship. He kept his hands in his lap as he looked around at the swimming sea life. At one point in his life, Lukas, Marius, and he all would sit on the edge of this ship and just talk to one another about their plans for the future.

'But that was in the past.' He reminded himself as he fidgeted with his fingers. *'How long ago was the last time the three of us sat here? It was before Lukas left, before Francis's... demise... and before Marius started despising humans... so... eight? Maybe nine years ago?'*

It was hard remembering years that passed when he only learned the concept of time and dates not too long ago.

'But... what was the turning point for us exactly?' Arthur's mouth twitched a little as he watched a nearby pufferfish. As much as Arthur wants to say it was all Lukas's fault, he knew that wasn't true, he had some cause in their deterioration... not counting the curse he placed on Petru that was.

No, Arthur knew the moment their trio changed was when... well, he was caught with Liam and Lillie.

"What the-"

Arthur almost could have laughed when he heard Marius's shocked voice behind him. Of course, Marius and Lukas had grown curious about his sudden absence from their lives for the past couple of moons. He was pretty sure they just weren't expecting the little merchildren that had currently tackled him to the sandy ground.

It was a tickle fight and Arthur was losing.

Arthur was still laughing when he pulled himself off of the ground. Lillie and Liam, the names he had given them moons ago, respectfully backed off and lowered their heads. "Oh dear," Arthur finally managed to quell his giggles as he coughed. "I'm sure you two have questions-"

"You got a mate? When?" Lukas was the one to ask as he swam over to look at Liam and Lillie a little more closely.

Arthur gave a nervous laugh. Marius swam over to Liam and Lillie as well and swam around them with cold eyes.

Arthur just smiled and came up to Liam and Lillie as they started to shrink back in fear. Lillie ducked down while Liam, clearly a brave chap, puffed his chest out but still backed up.

Arthur wrapped both of his arms around them. This did the trick and both children relaxed. "No mate needed. I found them just outside of my home. Poor things were clearly abandoned and at such a young age. They were so skinny and just hardly getting by..." Arthur shook his head. "This strapping lad is Liam, and the lass is Lillie."

"Are they even siblings?" Marius questioned.

"Well, they are now. Liam, Lillie, this is your uncle Marius, say hello, he won't bite." Arthur urged the two to do so. Neither kid made the first move, but Liam did look up at Arthur. "Go on." he urged again.

Liam finally let go of Arthur's arm and cautiously swam up to Marius. Marius watched Liam and Liam tilted his head. "Uncle?" Liam finally asked when he looked back at Arthur, but before Arthur could properly respond, Liam turned back around and brought his hand out. "Uncle!" Liam grinned.

The very moment he showed no more fear, Lillie quickly followed his suit... but in a more...unconventional way as she tackled Marius with all of her tiny might. "Uncle!" she squealed with delight. She actually caused Marius to fall to the ground.

"Okay!" Marius laughed loudly. "Okay! Get up, Pipsqueak. Yesh."

"Uncle?"

Lukas had his eyes closed and he opened one eye at Liam as the child came up to him. Lukas reclosed his eye after a few seconds and kept his head turned. "Oh, Lukas, don't be that way." Arthur laughed when he came up to him. "Look into Liam's eyes and tell me he isn't adorable." Arthur spoke in what could be known as 'baby voice' when he said that.

Lukas made a bit of a face when he reopened his eyes. He looked at Liam for a moment or two before sighing out. "I'm just a little confused." Lukas finally confessed. "Why couldn't you had told us?"

Arthur frowned a little. "Oh..." He muttered. When he turned he saw Marius now had Lillie on his hip. She had immediately taken a liking to him. Marius seemed rather relaxed as he smiled at her. Arthur could only laugh when Lillie giggled madly and reached up and pushed Marius's lip up to look at Marius's unusual teeth. Marius brought her hand down and gave a firm "No."

"Well, a big reason I kept them quiet is that it took me forever to get them to trust me, let alone two other Mermen."

"They were feral?"

"Not quite there, but almost there. I think I got to them just in time." Arthur told Lukas as he picked Liam up. "I had to bait them with bits of fish. Eventually, they learned where the fish was coming from, and soon enough they started relaxing around me. Enough for me to make the claim that is." Arthur lightly tapped Liam's nose with his index finger. Liam wiggled his nose at that.

"Hm, to take another merperson's children... that's a new one." Marius hummed.

"Well, it's clear that their parents didn't want them. So, now I'm their father. But that's why I didn't tell you guys. Plus, I've been trying to teach them the basics. Like speech. I was going to tell you guys, I swear. Just when they were a little better."

"To think you'd be the first to... 'have' children." Marius shook his head. "And here I thought it'd be me."

"You have a mate in your sights, do you?" Lukas teased slightly and Marius's face turned red.

"Not yet..." Marius huffed at that. Lillie, once again, tried to pull Marius's lip up to look at his teeth, and like last time, Marius grabbed her hand and brought it back down. "What part of 'no' aren't you getting?"

"I'm still teaching them." Arthur laughed and with his free arm he extended it out as an invite. Lillie happily took and attached herself to Arthur. "But I meant it, you guys. I won't do what my parents or my brother did to me, I'm not abandoning them."

Arthur had felt something shift between them. It wasn't big a shift but rather a subtle one. Maybe it was because he kept it a secret, or maybe because they knew how much children take up a person's time, but after that day Lukas and Marius, something in them changed.

Maybe it's what caused Lukas to turn to the human world for comfort.

But Arthur couldn't fathom it at the time, and Marius seemed to become *clingy*. It was subtle at first. Dropping by almost every day to say hi and chat, then he'd start bringing some food over. Arthur would refuse the offer, he could catch his own food, thank you.

At first, Arthur feared it was because he became rather attached to Lillie as a potential mate in the future, but Arthur soon realized that Marius really couldn't care about that.

No, Marius just wanted to make sure that *Arthur* was still his friend. Arthur reassured him that just because he had kids that didn't mean they weren't friends anymore, but no matter how many times he told Marius this, Marius was never sure.

Arthur reached his hand out as a piece of plastic fell into the palm of his hand. He watched the plastic for several moments. He then closed his fist around the plastic and watched it melt.

Really, Arthur knew that Marius's behavior back there was more than just a- how did the humans put it?- a red flag? It was more than that. He should have seen how desperate and scared Marius seemed to be and he should have done more to help.

But he didn't. At the time he was so busy with Liam and Lillie that he couldn't see anything but an annoyance that Marius had become.

Arthur looked up at the surface above his head. No humans swam around his waters today, which was fine by him. The waters weren't safe anymore anyway. He could see the sunlight peeking through the water and watched as the waves above him rocked the ocean endlessly.

Arthur always wondered if he would have caught Marius's behavior and done something to stop it before it got out of control, could he have prevented Francis's death?

Arthur had no clue how, but Marius knew that Arthur was preparing to leave the ocean to be with Francis forever. *'Would it even have worked out, Francis and I?'* Arthur thought as he released the melted plastic from his hand. He didn't know. Yes, Francis tended to be rather annoying, but then again Arthur was brash. Their personality clashed more than once.

The idea made Arthur smile as the memory of when he first met Francis popped into his head. By the time he had met Francis, Liam and Lillie were already off adventuring on their own, but that didn't matter as he had three new children to take care of.

"How are you just going to leave me naked on a beach!" Arthur all but shouted at Lukas. Arthur was on his knees by the shoreline. This was his very first time ever on the shore and he didn't exactly get this whole 'walking' thing down just yet. Not only that, Arthur wasn't dumb, it seemed humans didn't exactly go for the whole 'nudity' thing.

Lukas hopped up and down as he slipped into his pants. "This was under your insistence and you couldn't have at least got me some proper clothes to wear!?" Arthur yelled when Lukas didn't respond right away.

"Calm down, I won't lie, I didn't think you'd actually come with me," Lukas explained as he threw his shirt on. "Also with your five kids. I figured the last thing you'd do was leave them for a day to come with me."

"Well..." Arthur blushed a little. "The way you rant and rave about humans, I figured... why not? plus with the newest addition of my family..." Arthur sighed.

"... Here." Lukas frowned as he tossed a towel Arthur's way. "Just wrap it around your waist and stay here until I come back and get you some clothes."

"I guess it's better than nothing." Arthur picked the towel up to look at it.

"Great. Give me ten or fifteen minutes." Lukas turned and was almost ready to start jogging to...where ever humans go to get clothes, but before he could take off, Arthur spoke just one last time.

"You know... it's nothing. Never mind, just go." Arthur sighed as he shooed Lukas away. Lukas simply jogged off after that.

Arthur swallowed hard. He was alone, on the beach, and naked. With a frown on his lips, he grabbed onto the sandy floor and did what he could to hoist himself up to his feet. For just a moment it seemed he almost got it down, but his knees gave out and he fell on his ass this time.

"Ouch! Bloody..." Arthur grumbled. He tried to wipe the sand from his body, but it just wasn't working. He wasn't impressed, at all. He couldn't walk, his hair was turning gritty and felt off, he had sand stuck in every nook and cranny of his body, and he felt that any minute he was going to get caught.

Minutes ticked by and Arthur decided to try again. With the help of a nearby boulder, he got back up to his feet and stayed there as he used the boulder as a crutch for the time being. His legs wobbled but he was able to steady himself. He looked down at his feet and wiggled his toes. "Odd." He muttered before looked over at the discarded towel. Slowly, step by step he tried to walk to it, with the bolder lightly scratching at the palms of his hands.

His legs almost gave out and that was when a hand suddenly grasped the towel. "My my, it must be my lucky day-" A voice suddenly spoke.

Arthur, caught off guard, actually let out a startled shriek that echoed so loudly that the nearby seagulls fled. "W-What the bloody hell-" Arthur instantly went into panic mode. "Who are you!? And don't look at me like that!"

The man just chuckled out a soft 'hon, hon.' laugh. "You can call me Francis."

"I'd rather call you 'frog'!" Arthur huffed as he snatched the towel from Francis's hand. "You sound like one anyway." Arthur blushed and wrapped the towel around his waist. "Pervert."

"You are the naked one." Francis winked.

"I- my clothes were stolen, thank you very much!" Arthur quickly came up with a lie. He let go of the bolder to make sure the towel was tightly wrapped around his waist. It was then did he realize that he was standing on his own. Arthur kept the blush on his face before he looked Francis up and down for a moment. "You can call me Arthur." He huffed in defeat.

"Oh, a lovely naked man with an equally lovely name."

Arthur blushed even brighter. "Yes, well, don't get used to seeing this 'lovely' face, frog. I'm waiting for my friend-"

"Boyfriend? Or Girlfriend?"

"Friend."

"So-" Francis got took a step closer and gave Arthur a suggestive look. "You're single?"

Arthur sputtered for a moment. "I am! But unfortunately for you, I don't date frogs! Eh-"

Lukas came back and Arthur didn't even see him return. All he felt was arms around his shoulder as Lukas hugged him from the side. Lukas wasn't 'touchy' in a sense. So this was a bit of a shock. Lukas sent a good place glare Francis's way. "Get lost," Lukas ordered.

"Oh my, you're just as adorable as he is-"

"Get. Lost." Lukas demanded once more with a bit more of a bite in his voice

"Okay, okay, I can take a hint." Francis threw his hands up in defeat a small smile still on his lips. "But, if you're ever lonely, Arthur-" Francis reached into his pocket and pulled out a small card. "Feel free to give me a call."

Arthur smiled and leaned back when he remembered that Lukas had stolen those clothes for him.

Still, Arthur never had any intentions of calling Francis. Hell, he didn't even know how phones worked back then, he still doesn't understand phones, but life was rather funny with how fast it could take a turn, wasn't it?

Arthur really had no intention of going back to the surface, it was just going to be a one-time thing to quell Lukas's whim. But he soon found himself back on the surface. Liam and Lillie had no clue what he was doing if they knew they might have freaked. Still, they were more than happy to watch their siblings.

This time he was going without Lukas, which might be foolish of him, but at least he had clothing. So, back up he went.

He had only been on the surface for less than ten minutes when Francis came up to him, and yes, Arthur was naked as he had just grabbed his bag of clothes. However; when he looked up at Francis he got a rather startling surprise. That's twice Francis caused him to absolutely scream in shock.

"You're naked!" Arthur yelled when he threw his boot at Francis it missed him.

Francis grinned "So are you! I was hoping to run into you again and I didn't-!"

"-Put some bloody clothes on!" Arthur threw his other boot nailing Francis right in the face. "Wanker!"

Francis actually laughed at that. Arthur huffed and started to put on his clothes.

"So, you like to skinny dip?" Francis questioned, when Arthur dared to look up he was thankful to see that Francis was putting on clothes.

"I don't know what that is," Arthur confessed as he buttoned and zipped his pants up.

"It means you like to swim naked. Hey, I'm not one to judge." Francis winked at Arthur. "I too am one to let the world see how beautiful I am. But if I were you, I'd be careful."

"Why?" Arthur threw his shirt over his head and wiggled into it.

"Because this isn't a nudity beach, one wrong move and you could get arrested."

"So why the bloody hell were you just standing around naked!"

"To wait for you, of course. You're just lucky this is the side of the beach that not many people stroll down." Francis smiled.

Arthur glared at Francis with narrowed eyes. "Frog, how long have you been waiting for me to show back up on this beach?"

"About a week, my pretty flower."

It took all of Arthur's will power not to jump back into the ocean. "...Why?" Arthur finally demanded as he walked down the beach. Francis was quick to follow, while still putting on his shirt.

"Because I just couldn't get you out of my head."

"You're weird." Arthur chuckled as they walked. "I hate to break it to you, frog, but I don't think you're my type."

"Oh, you can't know that."

"I'll give you points though, now stop being creepy and just leave me alone, you frog!" Arthur quickly jogged off to get away from him.

But Francis didn't leave him alone, the man was stubborn as stubborn could be. He might even be more stubborn than Arthur. Arthur would leave, and when he'd come back to the surface Francis would be there waiting for him. Francis would bring him little gifts. Once, Francis even brought him a whole bouquet of roses.

And day after day Arthur, being stubborn, would tell Francis to bugger off, and yet he would still come back to the surface... day after day.

It was the day he got the bouquet did Arthur finally ask. Together they sat on the sandy beach watching the waves. Arthur looked at a rose in his hand and twirled it between his fingers. It had a beautiful color and a lovely smell. "Why me? What's so special about me to you?"

"I've been trying to ask myself the same question." Francis smiled as he took a rose for himself. "But there's something about you... I think it's your eyes."

Arthur let out a soft 'ha' before looking back at his rose in hand but didn't respond after that.

"... You know, Arthur... there's this wedding on the beach tomorrow."

"Yeah? I see them all the time." Arthur responded as he started to pluck the petals off of a rose. It wasn't a lie, he does see weddings on the beach, lots of them. Humans really love this beach.

"Yeah, an old college roommate of mine. He's getting married to his high school sweetheart, isn't that lovely?" Francis asked and Arthur shrugged. He wouldn't know anything about that. Francis looked at the rose in his own hands and brought it up to his nose to sniff. "Well, he invited me to the wedding. I'm going to be a groomsman."

"Congrats?"

"Yes, and you see... silly me, at the time of RVSP I had put that I was coming with a plus one."

"Is that so?" Arthur narrowed his eyes already getting what Francis was implying.

Francis nodded. "Oui, I would just look absolutely foolish to show up to their wedding without someone by my side!" Francis dramatically threw his arm above his head.

"Forget it, I'm not interested-"

"There'd be free food." Francis smugly added like that would be the thing to get Arthur to come. Arthur frowned a little at that. Human food, he surprisingly, had yet to actually indulge in cooked food. He refused to up to this point, fearful that the food might upset his stomach. Would tomorrow be the right time to try it? Arthur made a noise and decided to try another excuse.

"I don't own any fancy clothes-"

"I'll buy you some!"

"Really-"

Francis put both of his hands on Arthur's one hand and clasped them around his. His hands were warm, warmer than Arthur's. "Please?"

Arthur sucked on his teeth before sighing in defeat. "Fine. I guess I don't see the harm in it."

Francis grinned. "Perfect! Now, uh, if you want, you could stay the night at my place. A nice warm bed- oh, don't worry! I have a guest bed!"

Arthur was putting the pieces together in his mind. The mention of free food, Francis's insistence that Arthur stayed with him for the night, and the 'warm bed' comment. Francis thought Arthur to be homeless. Arthur had been wearing the same clothes for days on end, and Merman was naturally skinnier than humans, they had to be faster than the predators in the ocean.

Of course, Arthur never mentioned his children to Francis, well he did but until much later. Arthur was honestly so naive back then. Still, he laughed when the day came. He was dressed in a nice black suit that Francis had rented him.

Francis had taken the grooms to the side and spoke to them in private. Arthur, thinking back on it, Francis was asking the groom (both of them) if he could a few left overs for Arthur because Arthur was actually surprised when he was gifted with bowls full of different food.

Arthur hummed to himself and with a snap of his fingers he used his magic to make a shape of a rose. He wished he would have kept at least one rose. Just something to remember Francis by forever.

Something better than the damn memory of Francis's bleeding body that constantly popped up in his mind time and time again. Arthur waved his hand and the magic rose vanished, it was never the same as the ones Francis gifted him.

'Marius, how did you do it?' Arthur thought. He knew *how* Marius killed Francis, but how did Marius get Francis to let his guard down? That question was still on Arthur's mind after all of these years. He knew Francis for two years, Francis was a bit of a priss, yes, but he's *seen* Francis wrestle a drunk Gilbert and Antonio. He knows when in a fight Francis can, and will, handle himself well. So what did Marius do?

Arthur wished he could go back up to the surface, just to see Francis's grave just once. But that damned Gilbert caught him at the wrong time. He was trying to heal Francis, not kill him, but Arthur had the knife in his hand. No, Arthur knew he was wanted on the surface.

Arthur's lips quivered. "None of that now." He told himself with a deep breath inwards. He then wiped any threatening tears out of his eyes. "None of that." He repeated. He's been sitting for too long. He should get going, plenty of things he could be doing right now.

Confrontation

Chapter Notes

The woes of a writer. When I first made this chapter I made 20 pages in a single day. Sounds awesome right? Well, I found the writing not up to par. So, when I looked at it again the next day I had to delete 10 of those pages.

Alfred ran his fingers through his hair as he stared at the patterns on Kiku's wooden table. "So, that was your youngest brother?" Kiku asked as he put some of his items away. They had just gotten back from the store and Alfred was starting to feel his anxiety take a spike upwards.

"Yeah, I don't think he expected me. Then again, I didn't expect him. If that big guy wasn't there, I probably would have snatched him." Alfred rubbed his temples. "When did he get to the surface, and more importantly, why?" Alfred bit at the edge of his thumb.

"Maybe the same way you came?"

Alfred's eyes flickered to Kiku. He thought about it for several seconds before shaking his head. "Not possible." Alfred finally admitted.

Kiku shut a cabinet and balled up the plastic bag in his hands before tossing it away. "How come?"

Alfred's voice was so uncharacteristically small when he spoke next "Because I think I found a secret..."

"..." Kiku slowly slid into the seat next to Alfred. "Which was?"

Alfred looked at Kiku before swallowing hard. "Okay-" Alfred finally decided to open up about that day and Kiku honestly couldn't be any happier. First, he went into a spiel about his father and what he did that caused Alfred to get upset in the first place. "So- after a few days, I just said... 'screw it, I'm going to get as close to the beach as I possibly can.' Just because I knew it'd piss him off." Alfred explained. "But... then I got stuck."

"You got stuck?"

"Yeah, I kinda accidentally... *beached* myself."

"Alfred-san."

Alfred laughed and scratched at his chin. "Yeah, not my brightest moment. The waves were something terrible that day. When I got too close they pushed me to the shore. I tried to claw my way back to the water, but... just my luck. The tide was starting to recede." Alfred shook his head. "With no legs, I could only move so fast. I tried to flop my tail up and down. I kinda looked like that one dance move? Uh- The snake?"

"The worm?"

Alfred snapped his fingers. "That one. I looked like I was trying to do that." He started to move his hands around in a weird way to imitate what was happening to him. "So, after flopping around in the sand like a... well... a fish out of water. Obviously; I'm thinking 'this is it. I'm going to die here.' I've, unfortunately, seen what happens to beached merpeople. It's not pretty." Alfred sighed and let his hands drop.

"What happened after that?"

"Well... I managed to roll onto my back. I figured that If I'm going to die, then I might as well look up at the sun while I do it. Now, the sun had dried my tail and the sand had helped it dry as well. Then... after maybe only five minutes... I felt it."

Kiku leaned in with wide excited eyes. "What?"

"It felt like a pinch just below my navel. It didn't hurt mind you, but I could feel it. Then... *Poof!* in a flash of green my tail was just completely gone. In place I had legs! I couldn't believe it. I had actual legs!" Alfred laughed for a moment before he buried his face in his hand and rubbed his forehead. "I found a secret... but... that secret just doesn't make any sense to me. Like I said. I've *seen* merpeople that are beached. They become shriveled up, their tails turned to dust, lose all their colors, and look almost like mummies."

Kiku frowned as he tapped his chin in thought. "So, that day I found you on the beach-"

"-You came only a few minutes after I had found out. I'm sorry I didn't tell you the full story sooner. It's just..." Alfred blushed and bit the inside of his cheek. "It doesn't exactly sound cool."

Kiku couldn't stop the laugh from leaving his mouth. "Alfred-san, you don't understand. That does sound cool, as well as interesting. Trust me, I would have rather find out you didn't have some sort of debt to an evil mer...wizard?"

Alfred's smile dropped. "No... I don't... but Peter just might, but Peter wouldn't be *that* stupid...would he?" Alfred started to shake his leg up and down when the uncertainty set in. He wanted to tell himself that: 'No, Peter wasn't that dumb, yeah he was a kid, but he was still smart(ish).' but another part of his brain told him that wasn't the case.

Kiku reached over and silently put his hand on top of Alfred's. "I'm sure it'll be alright, Alfred-san." Kiku quietly rubbed his thumb over the back of Alfred's hand and Alfred gave a small smile to Kiku in return.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right." Alfred leaned back into his chair.

"I'm going to make some Yakisoba, would you like some?" Kiku offered.

"Sure, I could go for some. Do you need any help?"

"No, I should be able to handle it." With a very small smile, Kiku walked away.

Alfred sat there for a moment or two. He stared at the patterns in the wood of Kiku's table before he frowned and started to rub his temples. "Ah..." He quietly hissed as full-fledged migraine suddenly struck him like a shovel to the back of the head.

It only got worse as the seconds ticked by. It actually got so bad that he had to take his glasses off his face to put his hand to his head. He knew he must have accidentally thrown his glasses across the table in his haste because moments later Kiku came poking his head in at the sound. "Alfred-san? Is everything alright?"

"My...head." Alfred wheezed. He squeezed his eyes tight as the lights in the room were not only turning blinding but were making his headache ten times worse. "I don't-" Even something as simple as talking was becoming hard to do.

He could feel his head throb violently and from the base of his neck up just felt like it was on fire.

"Here, let me get you some water or aspirin-" Before Kiku could even move Alfred fainted, smacking his forehead against the table in the process.

Gilbert was brought back home by Máximo, who gave Matthew to Andersen. Máximo promised he'd be at the station after he brought Gilbert home, but before Matthew could even speak with Liam he was shoved into Ivan's office with Eduard and Iryna. "There's something we need to discuss before we leave you with your... ahem, *brother*," Ivan explained. There was something in his tone that made Matthew frown.

"Okay..." Matthew sat down between Eduard and Iryna and looked at Ivan.

"About two weeks ago we asked how you and your *father* could have an impossibly close age. You remember this, *da*?"

Matthew kept the frown on his face as he slowly nodded in Ivan's direction, wondering where this could go.

Ivan sighed and reached into his desk. Matthew watched him pull out an older looking paper. He was being delicate with it like he was afraid it was going to disintegrate if he handled it too roughly. "This paper is dated back to twenty-twelve. I'm aware you don't know the concept of years too well, but in Twenty-twelve you had to be eight years old. That is if you're eighteen now."

"I think I'm eighteen." Matthew rubbed the back of his head. Ivan sighed out a low sigh and decided to just not question it. Instead, he slowly pushed the paper towards Matthew, again being delicate.

"What do you see in this picture?"

Matthew hummed and looked at the paper. "I see... a lot of people?" Matthew told the truth. Ivan, Eduard, and Iryna all stared at him. Clearly, they wanted him to go into more detail. So, Matthew leaned in to get a better look at the black and white people. Some of their faces were hard to make out...

But it's odd.

The more Matthew looked the more these people almost seemed familiar to him. Matthew's brow furrowed and he closed his eyes. He could feel a headache starting to spring on him. He reached up and quietly started to rub his temples. "I-I don't know what you want me to see." Matthew gasped. His head was already starting to throb violently.

"...Look-" Ivan gently reached over and grabbed one of Matthew's hands. Matthew didn't open his eyes, he was honestly too afraid of the lights searing into his eyeballs making his headache worsen. Ivan placed Matthew's hand down on the paper. "-Here."

With a slow and deep breath inwards, Matthew slowly peeked through his eyelids. The lights were all he figured and more. Still, despite his body's protests, he opened them a little more than half-way to look down at what Ivan wanted him to see.

There a man stood a cob pipe in his mouth and two little boys on each hip. He looked pleasant- happy even. The boys didn't seem bothered as they held on to the man.

Matthew's heart started to rapidly beat violently. This man, he looked *so* familiar. Matthew gritted his teeth so hard that he was afraid they were going to crack; his headache was coming back with a vengeance. Then went his hearing, all he heard was a low buzz that slowly started to spiral into an unbelievably loud high pitched ringing.

Really, Matthew had no memory of standing up, or even hunching over the picture. All he remembered was rocking back and forth while trying so hard to control his ravenous breathing. '*Who was he, this man, those boys, who, who, who, **WHO?**!*' Was the only thing Matthew could think in his sudden panicked state. It was like his mind was blocking off something he needed to desperately know.

The salty smell of the ocean, the sound of a machine whirling while the men brought up nets full of fish. He sat in his mother's lap while she sat reading a book with one hand, while the other hand silently rocked the nearby crib, keeping the toddler asleep.

Matthew felt his back hit the wall. That memory, it was *real*. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Eduard. He was saying something to Ivan. Something to the effects of calling for a hospital. Matthew blinked several times as the lights continued to hurt his eyes.

That man.

Those boys.

But... that couldn't be right.

He felt like he was on the edge of something, something that was causing his body and mind to ache as well as reject.

Then... Something inside of him seemed to... *release*? Matthew couldn't describe it. He felt like he was back in the ocean, his father using his magic on him to change his tail. It was that familiar pull.

But this pull exploded outward and when this happened it was like a whole floodgate of memories being hidden away awoken him. He wasn't the only one to feel this magical explosion as everyone in the room just stopped what they were doing and looked around. They might not have seen it, but they felt it for sure. They looked at one another quietly.

Matthew's senses came back one by one. The lights weren't as bright as they once were, the ringing slowly dulled down, and Matthew felt his heart start to slow back to a more reasonable pace. "Jack..." Matthew gasped. "Or... was I Joseph?"

The memories were back, yes, he was one of these boys, but which? His memories were mixing together the merman ones and the ones from when he was a human child-

He was a human child!?

Matthew's eyes widened as he shakily grabbed on to the wall behind him to help him stand to his feet. "I was there..." He whispered.

"What. Was. That?" Eduard questioned as he looked around the office in shock. "I felt something..." He took his glasses off and Matthew could see that his hands were slightly trembling.

Iryna looked pale and was shaking, Even Ivan looked a little shaken up by what he felt and saw.

"...I..." Matthew swallowed before rubbing his eyes tiredly. His body was starting to feel weak all of a sudden. His mind felt slow and before he knew it he passed out.

" Jackson and Joseph, How many times have I told you two to stop running on the deck?" Their father scolded them. Both boys pouted and clung on to each other at their father's harsh words.

"The day was nice...we were just playing tag-" Jack tried to defend their actions to their father, but he cut him off.

"I don't care. Boys-" Their father crouched down and put a hand on both of their shoulders. "We're in the middle of the ocean, the deck is slippery, and there are a lot of people working. You could not only hurt yourselves but hurt someone else. Okay? No more running."

"Okay." Both boys mumbled in understanding while they held onto each other's hands.

"Good, go down to the cabin and read or something- but don't you dare wake, Thomas." His father gave them both small swats on the butts when they turned. Nothing too hard, just a

warning.

Defeated, both boys retreated to the cabin as instructed. They stayed quiet as their mother napped next to the rocking crib in her own bed. Both souls fast asleep. The boat started to sway from the waves as both boys grabbed a book to read. Jack picked up Percy Jackson while Joseph grabbed the first Harry Potter book.

Together the twins sat side by side on their shared bed. They were fully engulfed in their readings within seconds. The boat rocked and swayed from side to side. It didn't take long for both boys to fully relax as they read. Jack curled up next to Joseph's side and splayed his legs out lazily while Joseph used his pillow as a prop between his back and the wall.

Then the weirdest thing happened: The boat completely stopped. As it wasn't even rocking anymore. "Huh?" Both boys stopped their reading to look at each other. It was weird like the ocean had just completely held still. Everything completely stopped and when the rocking stopped the crib from lazily rocking; It was then did Thomas suddenly let out a gurgle before erupting in a screaming cry. This awoke their mother.

With a tired groan, she slowly sat up. She rubbed one of her tired eyes "What's wrong, Little man?" She cooed sleepily and reached into the crib to hold Thomas. They watched her slowly jiggle her knee up and down in an attempt to get Thomas to quiet down. Thomas continued to scream and their mom reached for the baby bag.

Both twins came over and sat with their mother. Jack went back to reading while Joseph leaned over to look at the crying Thomas. "Can I try?" Joseph asked.

"I don't know, Joseph-"

"I'm Joseph!" Jack indignantly cried and their mother gave him a playful slap on the arm.

"None of that nonsense, I know who's who." She lightly chided at Jack. "Go back to reading, Jackson."

Jack playfully poked his tongue out.

Once her eyes were on Joseph she spoke: "Just be careful." His mother instructed as she handed Thomas over. The toddler fussed for a good minute when he was out of his mother's arms.

Joseph carefully leaned Thomas into his chest. This did it. The fussing started to die down as Thomas sniffled and held on tight to his older brother. Their mother, now baby-free, reached into the blue baby bag and pulled out a teething ring. "There we go." She cooed again as she handed the ring to little Thomas. Like a little monster, Thomas immediately attached his gums to the ring and started biting.

There was a low rumbling sound now. It sounded like the engine was revving. This caused the ship to shake, but in a more violent way, not soothing like the waves would do. The walls rattled and the whole place seemed to vibrate, then the engine died down. "What's

happening?" Their mother asked, both boys shrugged. Above them, they could hear the fishermen scrambling and yelling out commands.

"The boat just stopped," Jack explained as he flipped the page of his book. Their mother frowned at this and looked towards the deck.

"It just stopped? Is it caught on something?" Again both boys shrugged. Well, this didn't sit well with their mother. "I'm going to ask your father. Stay down here and watch Thomas."

That shouldn't be too hard, Thomas was already asleep on Joseph's shoulder, the ring hanging limply in his jaws. Then away their mom went to the deck of the ship. She instantly went towards the starboard of the ship where their father would be.

The engine revved again, this time a little more violently. Once again the walls shook, but not in the way it would on the waves. Neither boy was really scared about it, the boat being stuck was nothing new, but this stillness, it was just strange. Joseph hummed and stood to put Thomas in his crib. He had just put Thomas in his crib when the ship suddenly gave a violent jerk.

This caused Joseph to be flung back into their mother's bed, almost hitting his head on the wall in the process. Jack's head did hit the wall as he was, unfortunately, close to it when he was reading. "Ow!" Jack wailed in pain as he clutched the side of his head that had hit the wall.

"Are you okay?" Joseph instantly crawled over the bed to his brother.

"That hurt..." Jack pouted and Joseph moved his brother's head to the side to get a better look at it. A dark bruise was already starting to form from the base of Joseph's eye and up to his temple. Not only was it bruising but it was starting to swell. It looked rather nasty.

"Let me see if I can find an ic-" Joseph was ready to jump off the bed and look for an ice pack for his brother, but then came the noise.

It sounded like a ghost trying to free itself, a low creaking noise that echoed through the whole of the ship. Together Jack and Joseph stared at each other. It didn't sound like the engine or one of the fishing cranes. "Is the ship... moving?" Jack had to shut the eye he had hit now.

Joseph could feel it as the ship creaked and groaned, it was moving... it was moving... up? Up from the stern.

As if to confirm this the bed they were on slowly, oh so slowly, started to move down towards the deck. Instantly Jack darted off the bed, not because he was afraid he'd be thrown against the wall again, but because he was stopping the crib from sliding.

They could hear the men outside yelling and Joseph got up from the bed. He cautiously started to walk towards the deck but didn't yet leave the cabin. The fishermen (and women) were screaming in fear. Something about... something has a hold on the shift?

"Joseph..." Jack's tone shifted, it sounded cautious and startled. Joseph soon saw what was scaring him. The ship was moving higher and higher from the stern that Jack was starting to slide down as was the crib. Joseph rushed to help his brother steady the crib. Thomas woke before too long from the movement.

The higher the ship's rear became the harder it was for them to stay on their feet. "Joseph!" Jack gasped and he was soon on the floor. Joseph let go of the crib to grab onto Jack's hand. "Don't let go!" Jack screamed.

Joseph felt himself start to slide and realized they were sliding right towards the deck as the doorway was right there. "The crib!" Joseph tried his hardest to keep a hold of the crib and his brother but there was only so much he could do. Only seconds later did the crib go toppling down from the movement and out Thomas came spilling. He honestly would have gone flying out to the deck if Jack hadn't snatched him by the back of his onesie. Thomas screamed and wailed his little heart out so hard at this that he started to gag himself on his cries.

Jack's screams became high pitched and panicked. "Joseph! Joseph!" Joseph was falling. He felt himself slip and when he slipped so did his brothers. He desperately dug his nails into the metal floor of the ship, but that did little to no help. Then he saw it, a loose piece of metal flooring that was sticking up at an odd angle just wide enough for Joseph to grasp.

*They stopped sliding for just a moment. All Joseph felt was a pain in his fingers as the metal was tearing into the soft flesh of his hand. Jack was screaming now, between him and Thomas's bellows Joseph made it a point to **look down**.*

All he saw was blue and that confused him. If they were going down then why was he looking at the sky?

Then it hit him when he saw the waves violently ripple from the ship's movement. He was looking at the ocean. Jack's hand was slipping from Joseph's grasp as was his grip on the tile from how heavy both his brothers weighed. Joseph was faced with a decision.

Let go of the tile and they all go falling.

Or let go of his brothers and potentially save himself?

Joseph tried to hoist him and his brothers up to maybe grab onto something a little more sturdy, unfortunately, luck wasn't on his side. There was a powerful explosion somewhere in the ship, maybe it was the engine but just like that his fingers slipped. All three of them went falling towards the ocean. "No!" Joseph could only cry as he felt everything move in slow motion.

Joseph looked down at his brother's scared face as they fell.

Jack let out one final cry right before the ocean could swallow him and Thomas whole. "Alfred!"

"Alfred-San!"

Alfred jerked when something wet and cold splashed against his face. He felt water drip and slide down his face, the hair that got wet immediately clung to the sides of his head. Frantically and wildly he sputtered and jerked around. "The boat! We have to save them!" Alfred jumped and made a mad dash to the door. He almost slipped on the tile floor, his laceless skater shoes squeaked violently when he slid a bit.

"Whoa!" Kiku ran up to be in front of Alfred. "Calm down, it was just a dream!" Kiku yelled as he caught Alfred's arm.

"No, the boat! It sank! The boat!" Alfred wanted to break free from Kiku's grip but he just couldn't do it. He cried, Alfred cried loudly as he started to shake. "Jackson! He's hurt! Kiku, Jackson's hurt! And Thomas! He can't swim he's a baby-"

The slap that Kiku gave him was more than enough to make him somewhat sober again. It didn't hurt, it really didn't, it was just a small swat really. "Calm down, please, Alfred-san." Kiku breathed as he grabbed Alfred's hands in his own. "Come, sit down. Explain everything to me."

Matthew gasped when something horrible stung the inside of his nose. He jerked up, his head was spinning and he was trembling from head to toe. "The boat-!" Matthew yelled but was stopped by Máximo.

"Easy, *Amigo*." Máximo's voice spoke gently. Next to Máximo was Andersen. Andersen had two tiny things in his hands, they were broken up and Andersen tossed them in the nearby bin.

"Is he going to be alright?" Andersen asked Ivan, but his question went unanswered.

"Are you alright, Matthew?" Ivan spoke gently. He was sitting at his desk, his purple eyes narrowed just slightly as he looked at Matthew with great interest. "I sent Eduard to get you some water..." Ivan finally stood from his desk and started walking.

Matthew hadn't realized it earlier, but his breathing was heavy and he was almost panting like he couldn't get enough breath into his swallowed down a breath and slowly, but shakily started to stand. "How long was I?..."

"Not long, just a few minutes if that," Ivan explained as he came over. "Andersen, you're dismissed." He waved his hand at Andersen in question.

"Aw- I'm going!" If Andersen was going to protest one hard look from Ivan was enough to stop that and quickly he was gone.

"Was it a seizure?" Máximo asked Ivan in a gentler tone. Ivan's lips turned into a frown.

"No; at least I'm sure it wasn't. He showed no typical signs of a seizure. I'm sure the information was just a lot for him to handle..." Ivan was careful as he inspected Matthew's face for a few seconds.

Matthew buried his face into his hands and quietly rubbed his eyes with his palms. This helped his mind clear a little more. He was slowly regaining what had happened up to this point.

"Here you go, Mattie." Eduard had come back into the office with a cup of cold water in his hands. Matthew was grateful as he smiled and took the cup.

"So... Matthew, you... you do remember? I hope?" Ivan was gentle when he asked this question. Matthew lowered the cup and shook his head.

"I do... but... I don't at the same time." Matthew confessed honestly. "I think..." Matthew paused to take another sip from his cup. "-I may need to talk to Liam to fill in the blanks."

Ivan smiled. "That's what I was hoping for."

"Whoa-" Máximo put a hand on Ivan's shoulder to get his attention. "Is this a good idea? Matthew just *fainted*. Maybe give him a while to recover-"

"-I'm fine, Máximo," Matthew spoke softly as he placed the cup down on Ivan's desk. Máximo didn't seem convinced. "It was just a shock, I assure you. I *need* to talk to Liam after learning all of *that*."

"..." Máximo sucked in a slow breath before relenting. "Alright then... if you're *sure*."

So, with this, he was swept away out of Ivan's office. He followed obediently behind Ivan and Máximo as they led him down a hallway. "I'd never think I'd have to take you to one of these rooms," Máximo muttered with a bit of an awkward chuckle.

"What room is that?" Matthew questioned as he caught up with his guardian.

"An interrogation room. Don't worry, we won't be questioning you, it's just to give you two some privacy away from the hustle and bustle of the main area." Ivan answered for Máximo rather quickly.

"Alright." Matthew agreed with Ivan's point, privacy would be needed, it might get loud between them.

As Matthew had questions and Liam...

Well, Liam had secrets, didn't he?

Matthew rubbed his eyes as he was led down farther and farther down this hallway. Some doors were open, others were closed. Finally, they reached the door they needed to be at. It was shut. Máximo was the one to open it up.

"Now, the door is locked on the inside," Máximo explained before opening the door for Matthew. "But don't worry we'll be-" Ivan gave Máximo a hip-bump, silencing him for a moment. It seemed to be just an accident, so without hesitating, Máximo continued. "We'll be nearby. Watching the cameras." Matthew frowned and this time Ivan put his mind at ease.

"I know what you're thinking, the cameras are silent, they don't pick up sound. We'll just be watching in case it gets violent."

"Well, it shouldn't..." Matthew muttered to himself. Liam wasn't violent, but then again he did try and drown children. "But I do appreciate it."

"Alright, let's not keep him waiting too much longer now." Máximo opened the door and slowly Matthew went.

The room wasn't that big. That was the first thing Matthew noticed. There was a table and two chairs opposite of each other in the middle of the room. Liam was up and on his feet looking at himself in the mirror. Matthew honestly would have found it cute the way Liam was moving around to look at himself from different angles. "Did you know my eyes were green?" was the first thing Liam had asked Matthew. "I mean I knew my tail matched, but... seeing it for the first time..."

Matthew was about to answer honestly, but something else caught his eyes, that was Liam's boots.

Tied and perfectly laced.

"..." Matthew crossed his arms and focused on Liam's clothes more in detail. Along with the boots, he was wearing a button-down shirt. Now, if this were Liam's first time on land, those two articles would have been near impossible to put on without some sort of help.

"What?" Liam questioned after a few moments of Matthew just looking at him.

'He's playing the fool.' Matthew decided after a few seconds. It was becoming rather clear.

"...Nothing." Matthew just let it go and took a seat on one of the chairs. "Yes, your eyes are green, by the way." Matthew sighed as he placed his hands in his lap. Liam frowned and took a seat at the other chair across from Matthew.

"What's, uh..." Liam pointed to his own eyes. Matthew got the hint rather quickly.

"Glasses. Turns out I can't see."

Liam suddenly scoffed loudly. "What? You can see!"

"No. I can't." Matthew kept his responses blunt and he rubbed the back of his neck. "Not... here anyways." Then did Liam snatch the glasses off of Matthew's face suddenly. Matthew blinked in surprise, but Liam wasn't doing any harm, he was looking through them for himself.

Something was telling Matthew to watch his mouth. Maybe it was the camera Máximo had mentioned or maybe it was the odd feeling of being watched.

Liam sighed and then leaned back on his chair. Matthew, once again, narrowed his eyes at his brother's movements. Liam had kicked the chair back just enough to have two legs off of the

ground so he balanced on the back two, all while also having one foot on the edge to keep himself perfectly balanced.

Matthew tried to keep himself calm. "Liam, how'd you know where to find me?" Matthew asked in a soft voice trying to keep his tone level for the time being.

"Do the police not locate missing individuals?" Liam countered with a bit of a chuckle in his throat as he handed Matthew his glasses back. Matthew put them back on

"That's true... but, I didn't know what policemen or women were when I first came to the surface, so how could you? Unless that is-" Matthew leaned across the table to look Liam right in the eyes, Matthew narrowed his eyes when he talked again. "-This isn't your first time on the land, is it?" Matthew whispered the last part hoping Liam heard him.

Liam's mouth turned into a scowl and he sat the chair down. "You caught me. This is why I wanted dad to let me get Alfred and Peter. I know my way around here."

"Why doesn't this surprise me?" Matthew huffed and crossed his arms. "I've been learning *a lot* these last couple of weeks."

"Well, your mission wasn't to learn, it was to find Alfred and Peter." Liam bluntly put it as he pressed his index finger against the table.

"Which I've been trying to do. This town is kinda big. I mean what did you guys expect?"

Liam snorted at Matthew. "Excuses." He leaned back in his chair once more.

Matthew frowned this time around. "If you only came here to berate me then forget about it. I don't want to hear it right now."

Then Liam said something that made Matthew's heart stop. "Marius is here, Matthew."

"I *knew* his name sounded familiar..." Máximo whispered as the memory came back to him. "Matthew had mentioned a man named Marius before."

Ivan looked away from the two- way mirror. They were in the room right next door to the interrogation room. Ivan looked at Máximo with a raised eyebrow. "The guy that found Feliciano and Ludwig?"

"Yep, that's the guy." Máximo frowned as he put his hand to his chin in thought as he tried to remember what exactly Matthew had said about Marius in the first place. The memory was there, but blurry as it was just a simple passing conversation.

Ivan looked back at the two-way mirror watching the brothers. "So, why is it such a big deal?"

"I'm... not sure. I think it might have been something about... 'bad blood' maybe, I don't think so, but it was *something* along those lines." Máximo huffed. He then looked at the mirror with Ivan.

Máximo never had any qualms about watching people talk in the interrogation rooms before, but this time was just a little different. He won't lie, maybe it's because he's grown close to Matthew, or even *protective* of Matthew, but regardless, standing here talking to Ivan while openly eavesdropping on Matthew and his brother felt *wrong* to Máximo. He hated deceiving Matthew, but it's what Ivan wanted and Ivan was in the right. Matthew was hiding something and if he had known that they were listening in he would have possibly warned his brother or kept his mouth shut altogether.

Máximo shot a look at Ivan before looking back at Matthew. The two of them had missed a snippet of the brothers' conversation but it didn't seem to matter.

"-Do you at least know where they could be?" Liam had asked.

"You know... Liam is quite a strong-looking fellow." Ivan commented. "He looks a lot stronger than Matthew, wouldn't you say?"

Máximo couldn't help but hum in agreement. Liam did look rather strong and more toned compared to a twig like Matthew.

"I only got a small hint where Peter might have gone, but even still, I don't know where that is," Matthew spoke softly. Máximo watched Matthew bite at his nails after telling Liam this.

Liam let out a groan of annoyance. "Of course, I still don't know why dad made you come here, I could have found them way faster, besides he-" Liam went quiet and Matthew narrowed his eyes once Liam started to trail off.

"... Liam... some news may have come my way." Matthew slowly and carefully started his sentence.

"About your brothers?"

"No..." Liam puffed in annoyance but stayed silent allowing Matthew to speak. "Liam... for the past two weeks my mind has been *blown* multiple times and my world was turned upside down more than once. I don't even know where to start or what to ask right away!" Matthew sighed and leaned back against his own chair.

"Okay... ask the simplest question first."

"... Alright..." Matthew bit his lip as he thought on the question. He had so many and none of them seemed *simple*. "Liam... am I... did Dad lie to us about how he found us? Peter, Alfred, and I, I mean."

"..." Liam kept a frown on his lips as he narrowed his eyes just slightly. Liam swallowed hard and sat up a bit straighter. "Of course he didn't. He found you three wandering alone, remember?"

"Yeah, that's the thing-" Matthew scratched his head as he actually did try to remember, but even as a kid the memory wasn't... there. It was just blank. He never thought to question it

too hard.

His father found the three of them wandering alone near his home. Alfred hissed and spat at him, but with enough encouragement and food, he managed to round them into his home with Liam and Lillie. That was the story and that's what Matthew was told time and time again.

But, Matthew didn't remember a lick of it. "-I *don't* remember it, Liam. I never had. That's just what Dad told us."

"You're being silly, Matt-"

"Liam. Look at me, truly look at me." Matthew urged Liam to look into his eyes, which Liam had complied. "I want the truth. For once, Liam, just tell the truth."

"..." Liam sighed. Matthew watched him lean back into his chair and tap the table absentmindedly. "This is why dad was more protective towards you three... why he didn't want you... up here. Why he was laxer with Lillie and me compared to you guys." Liam's voice was unusually soft as he spoke and he couldn't even look at Matthew, no, he was focusing on the table now.

Matthew blinked and his body went cold as Liam continued to speak. "He told me he never wanted you three *here*, and he *knew* the truth would come out eventually, that someone, anyone would connect two and two. But you need to know this right here and right now. Dad did everything he did out of love for you three." Liam rubbed his face for a moment before continuing. "You are not one of ours, you three never were."

Matthew's breath shook and he put his hand to his mouth in shock.

"Why?"

"... He found you three after a shipwreck... he said it just broke his heart. That you three were dying and sick, So, he took you guys home and... did what he needed to so you guys wouldn't ask questions later on down the road."

Matthew leaned back against his chair, his jaw slack and his eyes no doubt wide. At first, he felt like someone had socked him dead in the chest, then came the anger and it came in like a hot iron. "Are... are you *fucking* kidding me!" Matthew hissed at his brother and abruptly stood from his seat so suddenly that the chair clattered against the ground.

"N-Now! Don't you get mad!" Liam spat quickly as he stood up.

"You don't think that is something that we need to know!? No wonder all three of us wanted to-" Matthew felt his breath quicken and he put his hand to his mouth. "-He had no right." Matthew whined softly as all the bravado he just had completely left his body.

Liam sighed and slowly walked over to Matthew. "Dad... there are times where even I don't know what's going through his head, but he's not a bad man, Matthew, surely on some level-"

Liam had reached his hand over to touch Matthew's shoulder, but to his surprise, Matthew quickly grabbed Liam's wrist and held it tight.

"Not a bad man?... Not a *bad* man?!" Matthew growled as he shoved Liam's hand away. "Did *you* know that dad has been on the land before?" Matthew poked Liam's chest and took a step forward. Liam, clearly not expecting this side of Matthew, took a step back.

"Well-"

"Did you know that dad had a *lover*?!" Matthew poked Liam again. "Or even yet, did you know that dad *killed* his lover!? Because guess what Liam, I know! I know all of this!" Matthew felt the tears prick his eyes before spilling down his cheeks. "So, Liam, pray tell how Dad can spout off about how humans are the killers when he was the killer!"

"Matthew-"

"He killed a man, Liam! A man who loved him! What's worse!? You're still going to defend him!"

Liam had reached up and grabbed both of Matthew's wrists and Matthew hadn't even realized it but he had cornered Liam. There was a small struggle between the two of them. "Calm down, Mattie, please-"

"How can you tell me to be calm!" Matthew cried as he tried his hardest to get his wrists out of Liam's hands, but it just wasn't working. Liam was still so much stronger than Matthew, he wasn't throwing his strength around, but was rather just using it to keep Matthew in place. "Did you not hear what I just told you!" Matthew continued to wiggle and struggle.

Liam did something surprising, he pulled Matthew into a bear-hug. "Don't-" Matthew growled and tried to wiggle out of Liam's arms. Liam wasn't letting up though. "Don't..." Matthew started to whimper and before he knew it his struggles calmed down and he rested his head on Liam's shoulder. Once Matthew relaxed enough, Liam sighed.

"Of course, I know of Francis," Liam whispered as he reached a hand up to lightly pet the back of Matthew's hair. "Matthew, Dad loved Francis, he loved Francis so much that he was willing to leave to be with Francis."

"Then... why'd he-"

"He didn't."

"How can I believe you? When you just told me that Dad... isn't even my Dad?"

Liam sighed a soft sigh and untangled himself from Matthew. Liam then pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head slowly. Now, it was his turn to find a good place to start. Liam paced about for a moment than two before he finally spoke again. "Yes, Dad lied to you, but Matthew, he still cared for you and your brothers as his own. Did he not?"

"..." Matthew focused on his nails.

"Matthew, this next question I'm going to ask. I want you to think about it as hard as you can. Think about everything Dad has done, and think about him as a person. Do you truly think he could possibly murder a man that he loved?"

Matthew was ready to say 'well yeah, I saw the picture!' but kept his mouth shut and did as Liam told him. He really thought about it. He thought about the first picture he saw of his dad holding on to Francis's arm with that little lovesick smile.

Yet, when he did, the image from the other picture kept popping up in his mind. He just couldn't get over his dad's face in that picture. No, he wasn't smiling like a maniac, but there was something off about that picture. He wished Eduard allowed him to have the picture so he could look at it again.

"... Dad doesn't like talking about Francis for obvious reasons," Liam spoke in a soft voice. He was looking at himself in the mirror. "But I can tell you, without a doubt, that if dad was willing to leave the ocean to be with this man... then Dad absolutely loved him and wouldn't harm him."

Matthew couldn't just believe what Liam had to say, but at the same time, Liam had a point. He just didn't know what or who to believe. The humans with the evidence? Or Liam's word? So, Matthew did the next best thing he could think of.

He changed the subject.

"Liam, this should be my final question. Why were you trying to lure the children into the water?"

Liam blinked in shock. "What? Have you gone mental? What have these people been telling you?" Liam sat down in his chair rather quickly and looked at Matthew with wide eyes. "Luring children?"

"Liam, I saw you. You were there in broad daylight."

"Matthew, I don't know what you saw, but that wasn't me."

Matthew's lips felt dry. "... I just can't believe that, Liam, not with... everything else."

"Matthew, I would never harm children."

"But Liam, I *saw* you-"

"When was this?"

"Maybe my second or third day? I can't be for sure-"

"Did you have those glasses on your face at the time?"

"..."

"It wasn't me. I don't know what you saw, but it wasn't me. You said it yourself, you can't see without those things on your face." Liam sighed and threw one arm over the back of the chair.

Could Matthew have been wrong? Matthew clearly remembered seeing Liam's hair color and curls that poked up, but then again... Matthew took his glasses off and looked at Liam.

It didn't sound impossible that maybe he just saw someone else, right? But Matthew just couldn't be convinced. "Liam..." Matthew placed his glasses back on his face. "I just don't know." He finally admitted. "I don't know about *anything* anymore!" Matthew crossed his arms and turned away from Liam.

"... Matthew, I've been trying to save children for the past six years. I would never *ever* try and harm them"

"Did he say 'six years'?" Máximo's eyes widened. "Gilbert mentioned how for the past six years children have been showing up dead on the beach," Máximo muttered the last part more to himself than to Ivan, but Ivan still heard it.

"Gilbert isn't a cop, and moreover: Out of everything that was said you focus on that? Not the fact that Matthew called us 'humans'? Or that Liam said that their dad was willing to 'leave the ocean' to be with Francis?" Ivan looked at Máximo for a moment before crossing his arms over his chest. "...If I didn't know any better..." Ivan frowned a little and Máximo could see the wheels in Ivan's head start to twist and turn.

"Please..." Máximo shook his head like he read Ivan's mind. "Don't forget, this asshole kidnapped Matthew and his brothers to boot. He's got Liam under his thumb and taking his side. Arthur is a dangerous man who could probably talk a cat into giving him its claws, I bet. Matthew is talking like that because that's what Arthur wants him to think; same for Liam."

"To such an extreme as calling us 'humans'? And convincing his 'children' that they live... in the ocean? Máximo. Think about it: You said it yourself. Matthew couldn't walk when you found him. As well as what I felt back at the office? It was the weirdest thing I've ever witnessed."

"Chief, with all due respect if you're going to suggest that Matthew is a... I dunno, a mermaid, then you have to know how crazy it sounds."

Ivan frowned at Máximo's words and looked back at the two brothers. "... It does sound crazy, doesn't it? But then again... So is a father that doesn't teach his children how to walk properly... Let's separate them for a minute. Can you take Matthew to Eduard? And when you finish doing that I want you to bring up those six drowned children, I want their files.

"Uh, sure, I guess. What about you?"

"I'm going to have a chat with Liam."

"You're a shit brother-in-law, you know that?"

Andersen blinked. He had just come to the bathroom to take a piss, he was in the middle of washing his hands when Eduard had come up to him. "Excuse me?" Andersen grumbled as he turned the tap off and reached for some paper towels. "You want to try that sentence again?"

"Nope. You lied to Tino about Peter."

"..." Andersen felt his teeth start to grit and he narrowed his eyes. "I don't know-"

"Don't you lie to me, Andersen, Tino told me this morning about how much Peter has helped him and Berwald," Eduard growled. "He told me that you told him that Peter wasn't missing, you know damn well that's a lie."

Andersen grabbed Eduard by his collar. "Now, you listen here you pompous asshole, I'm just trying to help Tino and Berwald-"

"You're *not* helping anybody, Andersen, if anything you're going to break their hearts when the truth comes out." Eduard grabbed Andersen by his wrist and jerked himself out of Andersen's grasp.

"... You don't think I know that!"

Andersen slammed his fist down on the bathroom counter in frustration. Eduard let out a grunt and rubbed the part of his collar that Andersen had grabbed. Eduard blinked for a moment before taking his glasses off of his face so he could rub his tired eyes. "...I have a duty to fulfill, Andersen. What stands is that Peter is a missing child." Eduard put his glasses back on his face. "Ivan needs to know where this boy is. I would suggest you tell Tino the truth before too long. Because Ivan will be collecting that boy either tonight or tomorrow, the question is Andersen. Is he going to suspend you? Or are you going to tell Tino the truth?"

"Are you threatening to tell on me-"

"I am. You have until my shift is over to tell Ivan yourself, or I'm telling him for you and explaining that you kept it a secret. That's your choice."

With that Eduard left the bathroom.

"You *fucker!*" Andersen fumed and spoke between his teeth. He, once again, slammed his fist on the counter in anger. A part of him was ready to take his anger out on the paper towel dispenser but thought better of it. He was mad, but not 'destruction of public property.' mad. So, Andersen just looked at himself in the mirror. "Shit..." He grumbled to himself as he let his head hang. '*I guess it's time to stop being a sissy.*' He thought to himself. "What am I going to tell Tino?"

Then, rather surprisingly, a stall opened. Andersen turned around quickly as a man came out of the bathroom. "Oh." Andersen blinked as the man sauntered up to him and started to wash his own hands.

This man stood just an inch or two below Andersen. His hair was a light shade of brown, his eyes were a shocking color of red. He looked unperturbed by what he heard as he just washed his hands.

Andersen decided to spare any excuse and just turned his heel to leave the restroom. He had reached for the handle and stopped when the man suddenly spoke.

"Sounds like you have quite a task on your hands."

Andersen turned to look at the man. "Cop stuff; you wouldn't understand."

"No, I guess I wouldn't." The man smiled and his two canine teeth poked out from under his lips when he did so. Andersen suppressed a shudder. He then got ready to turn again, but like last time, the man spoke just before he could leave. "-You know." Before Andersen could turn around he felt a hand on both of his shoulders. "I could help you, Andersen." The man whispered into Andersen's ear.

Andersen's mind started to fog, he wanted to push this creeper off of him and arrest him to boot, but he just couldn't as the fog rolled in and his mind slowed to a crawl. "I-" Andersen grunted as he blinked his eyes rapidly, it felt like... something was invading his body and mind, turning his reflexes to jelly. He could feel this man slowly start to pet the back of his head before there was a painful tug.

"There, there, I just need something from you first. Now, Don't you worry about Eduard von Bock..."

"Don't-... don't worry about Eduard..." Andersen repeated back in a monotone voice. "Don't worry... about Eduard von Bock..."

"Don't worry about Lukas or Emil until dawn comes."

"Don't worry about Lukas or Emil..."

"Go to your car and go for a drive."

"Go drive."

Marius grinned and watched Andersen slowly walk away. Away he would go and drive. Where? It didn't matter.

Marius held a strand of Andersen's hair in his fingers. "I couldn't have planned that better myself..." With a triumphant smile, Marius opened his mouth and placed the hair on his tongue.

It felt gross for a second before the hair started to melt.

You see, Marius found a secret. A secret that's come in handy for these last few years. With the right amount of magic, will-power, and pain resistance one could manipulate their ability to camouflage. As long as it is within the realm of possibilities. He couldn't take the hair of a

toddler and change himself to look like them, not like he wanted to anyway, but a man like Andersen? Or even Arthur's golden child? Marius could happily and gladly do.

At first, it was absolutely excruciating for Marius to do, so much so that he told himself he'd never attempt it again, but over time he found it more of an annoyance than anything. It wasn't fun as his body adjusted to Andersen's height, or when his facial features cracked and shifted around to match Andersen's own face. For Marius, the worst part that always came was the eyes. His eyes burned and watered as the color went from a deep red to an indigo-violet color.

By the time his transformation was complete, Marius was on the bathroom floor breathing heavily while drool slowly trailed down his chin and made a small puddle on the floor. It only took a total of three or four minutes for everything to change. When Marius first started it took ten minutes, but his magic was a lot better than it was back then.

With shaky hands, he used the sink as an anchor to help him up to his feet. Marius's knees almost gave way. "Son of a bitch." Marius hissed and turned on the cold water. He splashed his face for a few seconds in an attempt to get his mind clear. Then he looked at himself in the mirror.

"Hmm..." He looked at Andersen's face from every angle. Marius opened Andersen's eyes wide, pushed his eyelids up and the bottom of his eyelids down. He looked at his teeth and grunted. No matter how many times he changed form he could never get the teeth right, his teeth were the only things to stay the same. "I guess I won't be smiling around Lukas." He grumbled, his teeth were a dead giveaway, unfortunately.

"But... before I go to Lukas, I should really pay Dr. von Bock a little visit."

Reunited

Life never worked out the way one would want it to. You tell someone to jump up; they decide it's better if they lay down on the ground instead. For Ivan that happens *a lot* at the police station. More often than he'd like. In fact, it was happening to him right this second.

"What do you mean 'Eduard is gone'?" Ivan growled at Emma as they stood outside of the interrogation rooms. Ivan was in the middle of questioning Liam when Emma knocked on the door for his attention.

"Máximo, Matthew, and I have all been looking for him, but he's just not in the building anymore."

"Is his car in the parking lot?"

"Yes, and all his stuff is in his office but he's just *gone*. We've checked every nook and cranny of this place, boss."

Ivan sighed and pinched at the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "Are you sure he's gone?"

"Positive. We've checked the bathrooms, the evidence rooms, and other interrogation rooms! We can't find him anywhere."

Ivan cursed out in Russian before looking up to the corner of the hallway; the security camera staring back at him. "... Check the cameras." He looked back at Emma. "They'll tell you where he went. If he did that is. You shouldn't have to rewind far: an hour or two tops."

Emma looked over her shoulder at the same camera and then back at Ivan. "Got it."

Ivan watched her go and even followed her out to the main area, he never left the hallway, but if Eduard were truly missing, then Ivan would be a shit cop if he didn't at least look out at his employees to see if anyone else was missing or looking shift.

Ivan crossed his arms and watched the cops hustle and bustle about, some with criminals, some just doing paperwork. Then he frowned when he noticed that Tolys was missing from his desk as well as Andersen. Ivan stood by and waited for one or both of them to return, but after ten minutes of standing around neither made an appearance.

"Hmmm..." He felt a growl leave his throat and his eyes narrowed as he looked at the two empty seats amongst the crowded chaos. "It seems Liam will just have to wait a little longer," Ivan muttered to himself as he promptly turned his heel. From the hallway, he stalked off towards the security room.

It wasn't a far walk and when he approached it the door was already ajar and voices could be heard.

"-Because you didn't go back far enough-" Máximo's irritated voice spoke first.

"Máximo, I swear to god if you don't back off-" Emma snarled at her partner.

"-Wait, I think I saw something interesting-" Matthew's quiet voice spoke up but went unnoticed by the other two.

Ivan approached the open door and peeked inside. Emma and Máximo were standing studying the camera's while Emma was controlling the speed and rewind button, Matthew was sitting back in a chair with his arms crossed. Matthew was focused on one particular screen.

Ivan knocked on the open door catching everyone's attention. "He really shouldn't be here, but I guess I'll allow it." Ivan started off pointing at Matthew. Really, Matthew wasn't a cop and shouldn't be looking at these cameras, but the more eyes the better in this situation.

When Ivan approached the camera's both Emma and Máximo obediently backed off to allow him access. Ivan hummed as he looked at the time stamp first.

"Máximo is right, Emma-" Ivan grabbed the mouse from the computer and started to rewind a bit. "-You needed to go back a bit. Not a lot maaaaaybe... here!" He paused just as quickly and pointed at the first screen to show the blurry picture of Eduard. He was just leaving Ivan's office after handing Matthew the water.

"Okay, this was at- when? Almost two-thirty pm?" Emma hummed and wrote it down on her notepad. A true cop to the end. Ivan, already knowing what to do, watched Eduard go out of the first camera's view and reappear in another camera. This camera was the one near Eduard's own office. Eduard popped into his office and they stood and waited.

Fifteen minutes passed before Eduard re-emerged from his office.

Out of the corner of Ivan's eye, he watched Emma write this all down. He saw Matthew lean in to get a closer look at the cameras and the screens.

Eduard at first walked over to the coffee and vending machines but didn't buy anything before he got distracted by something and off he went.

Máximo leaned in for a moment- "Could you rewind it?" he asked Ivan. "Just a few seconds before Eduard leaves the snack area." Ivan complies with Máximo's wish and rewinds it.

"There," Máximo spoke and Ivan paused it with expert reflexes. Máximo pointed at another screen. "If I'm right the snack area is just across from here. He's watching Andersen."

Andersen was up from his seat and making his way towards the bathroom.

It almost seemed like a silly assumption to Ivan.

Yes, Ivan knew that Eduard and Andersen never personally got along, but for Eduard to be watching Andersen would be just... well, silly! But, life was funny as it seemed Máximo was right. Andersen walked to the bathroom and Eduard followed.

Ivan fast-forwarded. Only minutes later Eduard was the first to emerge and stalk off. Ivan wasn't sure as the video was grainy but Eduard might have looked rather shaken. '*What happened in the restroom?*' Ivan thought before following Eduard's path once more. From the bathroom; Eduard went back to the snack area and actually bought himself something to eat-

"Wait!" Matthew jumped quickly from his seat and wedged himself between Máximo and Ivan. "Stop!" Ivan pauses and looks at Matthew with a raised eyebrow. "Did nobody else see it!? Go back to the bathroom, when Eduard leaves."

"What else could there be?" Ivan questions.

"Please, something isn't making sense."

'*Nothing makes sense to you...*' still, Ivan caved and did as Matthew requested and rewound the clips. Eduard left the bathroom and as does Andersen. Everything seemed normal.

"There." Matthew chirps up and points at the screen. Five minutes later Andersen leaves the bathroom.

"Okay- wait..." Ivan frowned and leaned into the screen, but didn't Andersen just...?

Ivan rewound again. Andersen leaves the bathroom, head down. Then almost exactly five minutes later... Andersen... leaves the bathroom?

"Is this a glitch?" Emma hummed as they all looked at Ivan like he had all of the answers.

Ivan thought about it. "Maybe... ?" he settled on saying with a shrug of his shoulders.

He was sure it had to just be a glitch of the system right? That the video had overlaid on itself. It happens... but... Ivan was having doubts. So, instead of following Eduard as they had been, all eyes turn to Andersen.

Which one?

Ivan could watch with wide amazed eyes as Andersen, the one with his head down walked in time with this other Andersen. The first Andersen, head down, walked to his desk, grabbed his keys, and walked out of the building.

But this second Andersen paced around the hallway for a good minute or two. His whole demeanor was very... not Andersen like though. From the way he held himself, to the way he paced around just looked off. Also, as far as anybody knew, Andersen didn't pace.

Then came Tolys.

Tolys walked down the hallway that Andersen was in, reports and folders in Tolys's arms. Sadly this was CCTV meaning no audio would be recorded (not like they'd hear what was said anyway). It seemed that Tolys just gave Andersen a friendly greeting and walked off out of the camera's view.

Andersen turned away from Tolys before suddenly looking back at the man. Then away Andersen went down the same direction as Tolys. They all watched, glued to the screen as Andersen went off-camera along with Tolys.

Ivan looked at all the cameras he could but neither of them showed back up until maybe ten or so minutes later. Together they were walking down the hallway towards Eduard's office. They both walked into Eduard's office. Ivan fast-forwarded as far as he could before the time caught up with the current time.

"What the hell?" Máximo and Emma shared a look. Ivan didn't know why, but he looked over at Matthew. Matthew looked pale and his hand was over his mouth in shock. "We checked his office..."

"Nobody left for over two hours, but the office is empty?" Emma looked at Ivan for answers.

"Are we ignoring the bigger picture here? There are *two* Andersens. I know what I saw." Ivan almost whispered the last part as he started to rasp his nails against the desk. "Two Andersens... one is bad enough, but two? Also what the hell was up with Tolys?..."

"..." Matthew took a seat. He still looked rather shaken as he stared at a nearby wall but said nothing.

"We should check the office again... just in case-"

"Emma, we checked it. There was nobody there."

"Maybe we missed something! Tolys and Andersen... this weird... *second* Andersen went in there. What if they did something to hurt Eduard-"

"They'd be fools," Ivan growled. "Damned fools, they know better than to throw their power around. But why would they even target Eduard to start with?"

"... Well... it's no secret that Andersen doesn't like Eduard. If I'm right... Eduard has a massive crush on Tino Väinämöinen. Andersen's brother-in-law. Andersen hates it, he said Eduard is like a lovesick puppy. Maybe something happened that caused Andersen to snap?" Máximo speculated as he scratched at his chin.

"I'm all too familiar with Eduard's crush, but Eduard knows better than to act. He knows Tino is married." Ivan commented as he took a seat in a nearby chair. "Also... this Andersen... I can't describe it, the way he walks and the way he moves... it's not Andersen."

"What? You're suggesting that Andersen just has a clone-" Emma scoffed and crossed her arms at Ivan.

"Maybe it's someone in a wig?" Máximo questioned.

"A *perfect* wig and facial structures?" Ivan countered.

"Well, it's better than... I don't know, a magical clone?!" Emma then huffed.

"..." Matthew whispered something so soft that Ivan couldn't even hear it properly. It did make Ivan look over at Matthew, but not for long. He had better things to focus on right now.

"We should still go back and check the office," Emma spoke. "I'm checking with or without you two." She decided before storming out of the security office.

Máximo rolled his eyes. "Fine! If it'll make you feel better!" Máximo retreated after his partner.

Ivan scooted out of his seat and stood. He should check with them, if this was some weird ambush then he should make sure it'd be a fair fight. He was already thinking of all the ways he might have to break Andersen's arms if he tried anything stupid. He strutted out of the office and followed along with the other two.

The funny thing was, Ivan actually forgot about Matthew's existence in his haste to follow Emma and Máximo. If he had been paying attention he might have noticed Matthew follow behind him for just a few steps, before ultimately retreating away from Ivan, Emma, and Máximo and going down towards the interrogation rooms.

Liam sighed impatiently as he looked through the file on the desk for the umpteenth time. Six children dead, six children drowned, six children he had failed to save.

No matter how many times he had physically fought Marius or even managed to stop Marius, it was never enough. Marius was always just one step ahead.

The man talking to him, Officer Braginsky was clearly trying to either place the blame on Liam, which was bullshit or tried to get Liam to clue him in. Liam never did get a chance to say anything as the man was pulled away. He's been gone for a good while now. Liam was actually starting to wonder if he's been forgotten about.

Liam crossed one leg over the other and looked at the poor soul who was drowned last year. He studied the picture and inwardly cringed. They didn't supply him with fresh pictures of smiling youngsters, no, these were pictures of death. Liam could only look at the poor soulless body for a moment before flipping the picture upside down and placing it back into the folder.

Liam pressed his cold hands against his face and groaned. "This year will be different. It *has* to be." He whispered to himself.

Finally, the door to the room opened. Liam brought his hands away from his face and sighed. "Took your time- eh?" Liam blinked when he turned his head and saw Matthew standing there.

Matthew's mouth was turned down into a frown and he had a worried expression plastered all over his face. "Matt? Is something wrong?"

Matthew's face looked at Liam then at the files on the table. "What's that?" Matthew asked in a softer than usual voice.

"..." Liam shifted uncomfortably in his seat a little. "Children... dead."

"From... the last six years, right?"

"I didn't-" Liam immediately went to defend himself but Matthew put his hand up to silence his older brother.

"Grab the file, we're leaving."

"We are?" Liam grabbed the file and stood. "Just like that? I don't think this is how it works-"

"It's not. But if you don't get your ass in gear I'm leaving without you."

"Alright! Alright! What's happening?" Liam followed Matthew out of the room and the two kept in step as they hurried down the hallway.

"You're right, Marius is here, in fact... He may still be in this building." Matthew looked over his shoulder as he almost whispered that last part. "... " Matthew's face turned into a scowl as he picked up his pace a bit.

"That's not good-"

"Moreover; I want to apologize. The pieces are starting to fit, I know you didn't murder those children."

"Told you-"

"Liam-" Matthew paused his walking right before they got to the main area. He put a hand on Liam's shoulder. "Liam. Marius has *shapeshifting* abilities." Matthew growled in a low almost unnatural voice.

Liam blinked in surprise. "W-What, but that can't be right-"

"It is." Matthew hissed. "I witnessed it on- well, through that thing." Matthew pointed up at a camera in the corner of the hallway. "He took the identity of a cop. The cop- Andersen is his name- went to the bathroom. Liam, I watched as *two* Andersens left that same restroom five minutes apart from each other. I think he's been taking your identity so the humans think you're doing all of these drownings."

"... That makes so much sense..." Liam stared at the carpet beneath his feet. He thought about all of the times he and Marius had fought over the years and every time it got physical Marius would always- *always* go for Liam's hair. Marius pulled out a good amount every time they physically fought. Could that be the reason why?

"So, we *have* to go. Now." Matthew grabbed Liam's hand and finally started leading him towards the main area. "Don't draw any attention to yourself." He spoke a little more quietly to Liam.

"Speak for yourself." Liam huffed.

Honestly, it was easier to smuggle Liam out than Matthew had originally thought. With the hustle and bustle of the main area, the 'bullpen' as Andersen once called it. Nobody gave them a second look as they were busy with other people. It also helped that Máximo, Ivan, and Emma were all distracted.

So, within thirty seconds they were outside of the building. Liam was quick to make a decision once they were outside and pointed his thumb to the direction of the beach. "Great-back to the ocean-"

Liam tried to drag Matthew with him, but Matthew dug his heels into the concrete and jerked Liam back. "Absolutely not-"

"-This isn't up for debate, Mattie, you just said it yourself. Marius has shapeshifting abilities that now makes the land way too dangerous-" Liam tried to jerk Matthew again.

Matthew, once again, jerked his arm back, forcing Liam to take a step back. "-For Alfred and Peter! Who, I should tell you, *don't know this information!*" Matthew spat. "No! I'm not going back into the ocean until they do!"

"You will leave that to me! You had your chance-"

"No! Liam, I'm not leaving you on the land to try and fend Marius off on your own!"

"Matthew, this is too dangerous-"

"Yeah, I know that, but Liam, these humans, they've opened my eyes in more ways than I could begin to fathom, but right now it's not just our family that's on the line here. Liam, I know the cop he shifted too, not only that but he might have hurt Eduard... he might hurt Máximo! Or Gilbert, or anybody I've come to care about these last two weeks! It's more than just our family now. Especially if Marius has been killing human children!"

Liam set his jaw before he started to grit his teeth. "You... The last thing I want is for you, Alfred, Peter, or Lillie to get involved, or worse, hurt!" Liam confessed. "Matthew... please... just go home."

"I can't. Not until Marius is stopped and I know the humans will be safe."

Liam sighed out a low sigh and looked down at his boots. "... Nothing will change your mind... will it?"

Matthew shook his head and put a hand on Liam's shoulder. "I know you're used to doing this alone, but Liam... did you, or dad, ever think that maybe, just maybe, these six children wouldn't have lost their lives if Alfred, Peter, or I had known? I know why dad trusts you so much more than he trusts the three of us, but does he really trust us so little that he couldn't have told us what Marius was doing?"

Liam's eyes softened and he crossed his arms over his chest. "... He doesn't distrust you... dad really does love you three. So much so that he wanted to keep you three out of the bloodshed... Walk with me. Away from this police station. I'll fill you in."

"No more lies?"

"...No more lies."

With that Matthew smiled and walked alongside his brother as Liam started to explain everything he knew, and down the sidewalk, they went. "Starting off: I'm sure you've noticed the pattern in these killings?" Liam flashed the folder to Matthew. Matthew shook his head.

"I didn't even know until... well... today." Matthew kept his voice soft as they briskly walked down the sidewalk.

"I'll keep it brief then. Marius has a time-limit every year for this."

"A time-limit? Why is he even killing children to start with?"

"..." Liam kept his eyes downcast as he walked, but then suddenly he stopped and turned. Matthew watched Liam put his hands on the guard rail.

The city was built around the ocean, so they were looking directly down at the ocean as it beat against the wall of the city and crashed so violently that the waves were white. It was a drop that nobody would want to take. "...Dad... did something I still don't agree with and... neither will you."

Matthew tilted his head and put his own hands on the guard rail. "Marius killed Francis, I told you this, yeah?" Liam asked as a brisk wind passed them.

"Yes."

"... You see, Dad knew of this and with Francis taken from him he was swallowed by grief and anger. Never a good combination to start with. So... Dad, placed a curse on Petru.... God..."

"What... but that's..."

"He was upset and only saw red. Dad did what he thought was fair retribution and he cursed Petru. Marius had only *just* adopted Petru as his own; not even a year at the time. Petru was just a baby... I don't know the whole of the curse, but Marius found a way to heal Petru. By the end of the summer he must have a human child soul or Petru dies..."

"Jesus Christ. Can't dad reverse it?"

"He tried... but from what I know Marius, kinda understandably, won't let dad near Petru."

"Does it have to be human? And does it have to be a child specifically?"

"I don't know... I don't think it has to be a human soul, I've stopped Marius from snatching Mer-children before, but I think he specifically chose human children for a reason."

"Which is?"

"They're easier to drown than adults, they're tiny and it's easy for them to be grabbed before their parents know they're missing. In all of these files I've read and seen each parent had stated to have either looked away from their kid long enough for Marius to snatch, or their child was alone on the beach when it happened." Liam explained and ran his fingers through his wild hair. Matthew leaned his arms against the railing and looked down at the waves beating against the wall below.

"I don't think it has to be a child specifically, I think almost any human soul would work, but Marius prefers it to be children. Babies? All humans have a hold on their babies or toddlers. Adults? adults are harder to drown and might fight back or violently."

"Holy crap." Matthew shook his head as his brother explained it all to him.

Liam's eyes then darkened as he looked down at the ocean with Matthew. "That's why dad wants Alfred and Peter back ASAP. If they are in debt to Marius there isn't a doubt in my mind that he wouldn't try and harvest their souls for Petru."

"Why would Dad do something so dumb?"

"Anger makes us do things we wouldn't normally do..."

"... Why did Marius murder Francis?"

Liam shrugged and looked over at Matthew. "In all honesty, that's the one thing I just can't fathom. I've known Marius back when he and Dad were still friends and him murdering Francis..." Liam tsked his tongue and shook his head. Matthew frowned and leaned heavily against the railing.

"Okay... final question: What happened to the fishing boat? How'd it suddenly capsize the way it did? This all took place before the Francis incident, right?"

Liam's frown stayed prominent on his face. "What... What do you remember?"

"I remember the boat sinking but from the stern-" Liam gave Matthew a bit of a confused face and Matthew decided to try that again. "It was sinking, but down with the backside still up. It was lifting higher and higher. I had Thomas in my grasp- uh... Peter, I mean. Then there was a big explosion and then we were falling."

Liam didn't answer right away as he looked away from Matthew and down at the violent waves.

"I wasn't there that day. Dad was starting to trust Lillie and I to adventure on our own. I wasn't there to see how it sank, but... I remember the explosions and the oil that spilled into the ocean. There was more to it than just the ship sinking, you know? The oil spilled and soon the fire came right after it. It was absolute chaos. Lillie and I raced over to the scene... Dad, Lukas, and Marius were already there. Lukas was screaming at Marius and hitting him in the chest while crying and Dad just looked... well... shocked about the whole thing."

"So, Marius sank it? But why?"

"I'm only speculating here... as, again, I wasn't there, Mattie. I think Marius was either trying to impress them with a new magic trick of his, nothing new; as Marius was often showing off his abilities. Or... Marius despised humans I mean, he absolutely loathed the human race for taking what's ours and polluting our waters. Maybe he saw the boat and just snapped and flipped it, take your pick." Liam shrugged his shoulders and the two of them stood next to each other.

"We should get moving." Matthew finally spoke again after a few minutes of silence. "They'll be looking for us and the longer we stay in one place the easier it is for them to find us."

"But where to?"

"Well... Máximo is out for the time being..." Matthew frowned when the reality started to actually set in. "..."

"..."

"..."

The silence went from uncomfortable to an almost stifling level

. Matthew thought about it and frowned as he tapped his chin in thought. "Well... there is somewhere..." he was reluctant to state.

"Hm? Where?"

"A friend of mine... he's a nice guy, he might be able to take us for the night. But that's only if he's willing..."

"I guess there's no harm in asking, right? The worst he can say is 'no'."

"Yeah... follow me." With a flick of his wrist, Matthew motioned Liam forward. "If this fails we'll have to find somewhere else and quick."

As they both quickly ran away from their spot neither of them noticed a red-eyed Officer Tolys off in the distance watching their every move.

Marius was quiet when he entered Andersen's home. Honestly, he didn't have to be quiet, he was Andersen, and nobody would question a thing, but he just couldn't bring himself to make a show. So, he slipped inside.

The house was still and calm. He walked from the front door and slowly sauntered into the kitchen. Nobody was inside, if he didn't know better he would have thought the house to be empty; but no, he checked. Lukas and Emil were, for sure, inside. They were just in their own rooms doing their own things.

Marius walked past the kitchen, not really bothering to give it any more than a passing glance. Instead, he walked down the hallway. One lone hallway in the whole house, this

hallway sported four rooms. Three bedrooms and a bathroom. Marius frowned and stopped in front of the first door on his right.

He didn't know whose room this belonged to, it could be either Emil, Lukas, or Andersen's bedroom. So, with a bit of hesitation, he grasped the knob and slowly gave it a turn. He then opened the door. Light spilled into a darkened bedroom.

There was a modest dresser that had a mirror attached to it. The room was messy with cups and bowls resting on the dresser and nightstand alike, the floor wasn't spared either as clothes littered the carpet. The bed hadn't been made and nobody was present. Marius scrunched his nose at the unpleasant odor that reeked through the room. This was Andersen's room, no question about it. So, Marius shut the door quickly and shuddered.

He moved on to the second door that was on the left. Like before he opened it and looked inside. Like last time light flooded into the darkened room.

Marius didn't even get the chance to look around as a lump under the covers on the bed gave a grunt of annoyance and started to move on to its side.

'Lukas.'

For Marius, the world could have stopped right there. Yes, he was on a mission to see his old best friend, that's why he came here... but it's been over six or seven years since Marius last saw Lukas's face. Even under the covers, Marius could see some differences in Lukas's appearance.

For starters, Lukas gained weight. Not a whole lot, but he wasn't as skinny as he once was. It was the human's lifestyle, no doubt. The humans had a sedative life compared to the merpeople. It's clear that Lukas's hair was cleaner and shinier than it was in the sea and neatly trimmed. It took all of Marius's urges not to go up and feel it for himself.

"Andersen..." Lukas sleepily groaned and Marius saw one of Lukas's dark blue eyes open and squint against the light. "You look weird. Go away." and with that Lukas snatched the pillow under his head and slammed it over his own face. "Go away!" Lukas's muffled voice screamed at him. Marius decided to just leave Lukas alone for now. He shut the door and looked at the other room.

Marius turned his body towards the last bedroom door on the left. He walked over towards the door and cautiously opened it. He figured maybe Emil would be sleeping as Lukas was, but Emil wasn't and he was up and playing with some sort of toy on the floor.

This room was the smallest out of the three. Still, it was complete with a dresser, mirror on the wall, and a bed that was neatly made. The room was a little messy with toys on the floor, but was cleaner than Andersen's room, at least there were no dishes or clothes strewn about.

"Hello, Andersen." Emil politely greeted him as he continued to play with his toy.

"You've- I mean... what are you doing?" Marius took a daring step into the room. He quietly got down on his knees so he was face to face with Emil. *'He's gotten so big.'* Marius could

only think as he stared at Emil.

"Playing." He said it like it was the simplest thing in the world as he continued to play with his little toy. It was a tiny car with tiny little wheels and Emil was pushing it around. "Big brother is taking a nap, so I have to be quiet." Emil's eyes flickered up to Marius. "And so should you."

"Of course." Marius put a finger to his lips.

Emil frowned a little and tilted his head. "You look... funny." Emil's eyes darted as he was looking at Marius a little more fully.

"Now that's not nice, Emil."

Emil shrugged and went back to his toys.

Marius got off his knees and sat on his butt. He watched Emil play for a few minutes. *'Look at him, so cute. I remember when Lukas took him in, he couldn't be older than... older than Petru... you know... if Peter's soul doesn't work... would it hurt to have a second backup?'*

It was a horrible thought to have, but... Would it work? Peter was technically a human by rights and a merman by magic, but Emil... Emil was born merman and made human by magic. Marius brought his fingers to his lips and quietly tapped the area as his mind started to think. Maybe he didn't need Peter...

Maybe he wouldn't even need the children-

'No, don't bank on just one thing working. Anything could happen at any time, I need options here. Focus on the children...'

Still, Marius intensely stared at Emil.

"... Do you need something?" Emil suddenly asked and turned to face Andersen. He wasn't being rude, but rather wary.

"Just thinking is all..."

"Bout what?" Emil plopped down on his stomach and started to lazily push the car toy back and forth with his finger.

"Things..." Marius tapped his fingers anxiously once more before grinning behind his hand. This opportunity... it was too good to pass up. He still didn't want to give up on his original plan, not yet. Emil would just be a backup just like Peter... maybe even a better backup than Peter.

"Tell me, Emil-" Marius reached over and lightly patted Emil's hair. It was soft to the touch and clean. Emil scrunched his face up and struggled away from Marius's hand. Marius brought his hand away and Emil immediately straightened his hair back to the way he had it. "-Do you miss the water?"

Emil stiffened and Marius prayed he didn't just throw everything away. "I forgot Lukas told you about that..." Emil relaxed just moments later. "But... I don't remember being in the water too much... I mean, I remember bits and pieces like that fight-... nevermind."

'*The fight...*' Marius frowned knowing exactly what Emil was alluding to. It was the fight between Marius and Lukas when Lukas told him he was leaving. Something Marius would rather not remember right now.

"Can we talk about something else?" Emil finally decided on asking.

"Well, I was wondering if *you* wanted to come with me to the store?"

Emil blinked and tilted his head. "The store? What for?"

Marius shrugged. "I'm bored."

Emil studied Andersen for just a moment before ultimately giving up with a shrug. "I guess since Lukas is sleeping." Emil decided and he stood up. Marius watched him go over to grab his shoes.

'*Now.*' Marius reached over and grabbed Emil from behind. He touched Emil's shoulders with both of his hands. Marius then felt his magic flicker for a moment only to suddenly be literally shocked upon touching Emil. The spark wasn't a normal little spark as it turned blue for just a second.

"Ow!" Emil yelped loudly. "Andersen, you jerk!" He pouted and rubbed his shoulder. "Did you do that just to shock me?!"

Marius looked down at his hands. His palms touched Emil and they were red and absolutely stinging. "Heh..." Marius could only smile to himself. "I see... clever."

"Andersen... you're acting weird!" Emil yelled out. "I'm telling!... Lukas!-" He then tried to make a break for it.

Marius growled and quickly snatched Emil by the back of his head and yanked him back so hard that Emil fell. Marius then put a hand over Emil's mouth just as quickly and crouched down next to the child. "Shut it!" Marius hissed. Tears instantly started to prickle in the corner of Emil's eyes as he laid there wide-eyed and terrified. "If you bite me I won't hesitate to kill you or Lukas, do you hear me?"

Emil's breath quickened, but he nodded in the end.

Marius felt insanely foolish for thinking that Lukas would make anything simple. No, it seemed that Lukas was either consciously, or subconsciously, using part of his magic to protect Emil from any sort of attack. Marius didn't dare use his magic on Emil, but rather he used his magic to look at Emil. He knew his eyes must have changed color because Emil started whimpering in fear.

Arthur may have the vision naturally, but Marius was easily able to replicate it. He could see it now, Emil was protected by a cyan shield. It was invisible to the naked eye meaning it was

absolutely meant to stop any sort of magical attacks, not physical ones and it was more than enough magic to stop any attempt of mind control or hypnosis from Marius.

It was tough magic... but not exactly 'durable'. No, with a day or two away from Lukas the magic would start to wither. But Marius didn't exactly have a 'day or two' summer was ending in less than two days and he honestly didn't know if he wanted to risk it or not. But now he realized how much of a hole he seemed to have dug himself into as he looked at a weeping and clearly terrified Emil below him. Marius let out a shaky breath and stared at Emil. He couldn't wipe Emil's memory or hypnotize him as he had with Andersen, but Marius would be a damned fool if he let Emil go...

That was when an idea hit Marius, he couldn't use his magic on Emil, no, but could he use his magic *around* Emil? Like, say... to transport him elsewhere?

One way to find out, right? The shield should just protect Emil from magical attacks, not transportation.

"Now Emil, before you do anything foolish, I should warn you, I might accidentally rip you in half if you don't *hold still*." Marius hissed between his teeth and Emil turned rigid, honestly, Marius was sure Emil was almost going to pass out from fright right there.

Marius closed his eyes and focused all of his magic around them. He tried to imagine his cozy little cave. Petru resting in his usual spot, his cave being inaccessible from all sides, say for his own magic, and the red glow from the seal he placed on the entrance being the only light source.

"You're going for a little *swim* whether you want to or not, Emil." Marius smiled as he felt his power flicker and with a simple push of his palm away Emil went with a rather loud 'pop!' that resonated through the air.

'If all went well he's in my cave. No way out with that barrier up either.' Marius honestly couldn't believe it worked. *'If all didn't go well... then I accidentally cut him in half, which is unfortunate... we'll see, I guess.'* Marius was ready to just go before Lukas woke. He turned his body ready to leave out of Emil's bedroom and just smiled to himself.

Lukas was going to be a busy man looking for his missing baby brother on the land, or would Lukas be able to detect it was Marius to start with and jump into the ocean within the next few hours... that could put a damper on things...

Marius rubbed his chin in thought as the wheels in his head started to twist and turn. His big plan was happening tomorrow and even though he fears that it won't work... a missing child might just put an end to it before it even gets started. No, Lukas absolutely *needs* to be out of commission until the morning.

Marius could try and use his magic to put Lukas in a trance or even to just make him sleep longer than needed, but if Lukas put a shield around Emil... odds are he would have protected himself as well... right?

'Well, this fool wasn't protected...' Marius looked down at his shifted form and frowned.
'There's a possibility that Lukas hadn't protected himself either; he just protected Emil...'

As Marius was thinking this he heard the sound of a door in the hallway opening and closing. He silently opened Emil's door and peeked out. Lukas's head was down and he looked half-asleep and rather dead as he waddled towards the bathroom. Now was Marius's only chance to see. Quickly he flickered to the vision.

Lukas's magic was still quite strong despite him being out of the water. Marius could see it swirl around Lukas's body every which way and it was as bright as ever, but as Lukas walked into the bathroom and shut the door behind him Marius was very pleased to see that Lukas himself had no protection around him. Meaning it was all subconscious protection. Honestly, if Marius wanted to kill him right now he probably could...

But where would be the fun in that?

So, Marius was swift as he ran to the bathroom door and stood behind it when it opened (he hoped). He waited only but a few seconds before he heard the sound of the toilet flushing. The sink turned on before being turned off moments after.

Marius's heart started to pound against his chest as he held his breath and waited. He had to be fast or else Lukas would use his own magic. Marius got his magic ready as he could feel his body shake in anticipation.

After what felt like eons the door slowly creaked open. Marius was right about where to stand and Lukas didn't see him as he started to shuffle back towards his bedroom in his half-asleep state.

Marius struck before Lukas could make it. He grabbed Lukas from behind and pinned one of his arms behind his back and used his other arm to wrap around Lukas's neck. Lukas let out a loud and startled scream and Marius growled. "Shhhh..." He whispered to his once good friend. His magic instantly seeped into Lukas's body. "Just sleep..."

Marius could only watch as Lukas's eyes flickered with cyan, showing he was about to use his magic, but it was just a flicker as Marius managed to overtake him. He could only grin as Lukas's eyes rolled into the back of his head and Lukas passed out in his arms only seconds later.

Marius let out a soft smile as he removed his hand and shifted so he had both hands on Lukas's underarms. Lukas's head was tilted back, his eyes closed but rapidly moving under their lids, his mouth just slightly agape, and his breathing soft and rhythmic. He looked so peaceful.

So, Marius was gentle as he laid Lukas out on the floor. "Sleep well." Marius grinned as he promptly turned his heel and walked away and out of that house for good.

Gilbert wasn't home and it seemed neither was Ludwig as Matthew knocked and called, but nobody came. "Damn." Matthew huffed in defeat as he sat on the stoop with Liam. "Well, I'm

out of ideas. It was probably dumb anyways, this might be the first place they look." Matthew rested his elbows on his knees and held his head in his palms. The folder he had taken was resting in his lap for the time being.

Liam sat back and pursed his lips to the side. Then came the silence. Like before the silence between them became heavy and almost uncomfortable. Matthew looked over at the neighbors garden and saw the flower bush growing beautifully. The plump flowers moved with the wind and almost looked inviting.

"We should start moving somewhere else..." Liam sighed and stood up. Liam started to talk and prattle off about possible places to stay for the night, but Matthew was only half-listening as he continued to stare at the bush next door. Gilbert had warned him not to pick the flowers.

But what was one flower?

So, Matthew stood while Liam continued to talk with his back turned. Matthew put the folder under his arm and then reached over and touched one of its lovely red petals. The flower was lush and plump so he pinched the base of the flower and plucked it with ease.

He only had it in his fingers for about 0.10 seconds before the neighbor's sliding glass door flung open. Matthew hardly had time to register anything when the owner of the house, and flower, rushed him and proceeded to smack him over the head with a broom. "Ow!" Matthew yelped, the broom came down a second time.

"Don't. Pick. My. Flowers!" With every word spoken the broom struck Matthew's head.

"Okay! I'm sorry!" Matthew took a couple of quick steps back to get away from the crazy man with a broom. *Now* Matthew understood Gilbert's warning.

This must have been 'Mr. Broomstick' Gilbert had warned him about. The little man with dark black hair and brown eyes huffed and looked furious for a moment before he blinked and backed up. Matthew felt like he'd seen this man before, but where? Then again, that might just be his new concussion talking.

Matthew rubbed his sore head and grimaced in pain. Liam came up beside Matthew. "I'm sorry about that, sir." Liam swiftly apologized on Matthew's behalf. The man honestly said nothing as he kept his focus on Matthew. "*Matthew* here knows better than to steal." Liam huffed and looked at Matthew.

"Kiku is everything-"

Matthew made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a scream as Alfred came up to the sliding glass door. Alfred's face went from lax to panicked in record time.

Matthew looked at Alfred, Alfred looked at Liam, Liam looked at Alfred. All three of them sporting the exact same shocked expression on their faces.

Alfred then slammed the sliding glass door shut.

"**HEY!**" Liam roared and then jumped the fence.

"Ah, Please-" Kiku gasped but wasn't fast enough to stop Liam from entering his house. Kiku was quick to follow behind Liam.

All Matthew heard was yelling followed by the sound of a struggle. So, Matthew jumped the fence and rushed inside. He wasn't but maybe ten seconds behind everyone else.

Boy... a lot happened in those ten seconds.

Liam and Alfred were on the floor, Liam was on one knee with his arms wrapped around Alfred's head in a chokehold. Alfred was on both of his knees trying his hardest to reach up and claw at Liam's strong arms.

"Get off of me!" Alfred yelled as he switched tactics and now tried to bite Liam's forearm as hard as he could. Liam responded by actually shoving his arm against Alfred's teeth and pushing up. "Gwad drammit!" Alfred cursed.

"You were here this entire time!? Are you kidding me!" Matthew yelled at his twin. "I spent two weeks looking for you and your next door to *Gilbert*?!"

"I dawn't naw who-!" Alfred tried to respond but was cut off by Liam.

"If you keep biting me I won't hesitate to choke you out!" Liam growled as it seemed he tightened his chokehold.

Alfred's face started to turn a nasty shade of red while he let out a loud gasping "GAK!... asshole..." he wheezed.

"This is my house!" Kiku yelled. "You have no right to barge in here and attack my guest! I'm giving you both ten seconds to leave before I call the cops!"

Matthew threw the folder on the countertop and decided he had to do something before it got out of control.

Liam didn't seem ready to budge. Matthew did the only thing his mind told him to do at that moment which was to reach over and slap Liam across the face. "Let go of him!" Liam actually blinked in confusion before looking at Matthew with rather shocked eyes. "We need him! You know this, Liam; you're not helping *anybody* by doing this!"

Liam's lips purse into a tight line for a moment as he studied Matthew before eventually releasing his chokehold. Alfred sucked in a slow and deep breath before he stood from his knees. The moment he caught his breath he turned abruptly and went to punch Liam, Matthew was quick and grabbed Alfred's fist and yanked him back.

"No! No more fighting!" Matthew yelled as he put himself between Liam and Alfred. "I need the two of you to work together!"

"Why should we?! So you can go running back to dad with all this information?" The question wasn't directed at Matthew but rather Liam. Liam's eyebrows furrowed in anger as his lips kept in that thin line.

"For your information, Alfred-... nevermind." Liam looked at Kiku and his mouth clamped shut.

Kiku was quick to pick up on this. "I know. I know about what...you guys are, so please, don't spare anything because I'm here."

"You told him?!" Matthew turned to Alfred in a second.

"Well... he kinda caught me in the water... it's a little hard to lie about what's right in front of your eyes."

"..." Matthew pinched the bridge of his nose and Liam decided to just continue with what he was going to say.

"Listen, Alfred. I had to tell Dad about what you were doing because Kiku was put in danger by befriending you."

Alfred looked back at Kiku before looking at Liam with a raised eyebrow. "Elaborate?"

Matthew and Liam looked at each other then at Alfred and Kiku. "Well... there's a lot to discuss... a lot." Matthew started slow and he grabbed the folder he had tossed. "Peter's on the land-" He then sat at the table.

"I know, I ran into him."

"What?! And you didn't grab him?" Liam huffed as he sat next to Matthew.

"Couldn't-" Alfred, being a gentleman, pulled a seat out for Kiku, who sat down across from Liam and Matthew. Alfred was last to sit. "-It was a public setting, and he was with some big intimidating guy."

"Okay, well this is still good, at least we know Peter is still in town and not in another town over," Matthew muttered. "We'll discuss that later... I think we should catch you up to speed with what we know first. Right, Liam? No more lies, remember?"

"No more lies... but you two better sit tight because it's going to be a long story."

Expectations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"-And that should be everything, right?" Matthew looked over at Liam who sluggishly nodded.

Alfred had his face against the table and just let out a low groan while Kiku sat still. Clearly contemplating all that was just told to him

. "What the actual hell is wrong with our family?" Alfred pulled himself up from the table with great effort. "Like seriously?"

Matthew could only shrug while Liam looked down at the table. Matthew looked out at the sliding glass door, it was night time now. The sun had set just a while ago.

"What could Marius be planning? Do you know?" Kiku spoke next as he looked at the police files. He seemed to be reading them with great interest.

"He wants a soul, he has yet to get one this year." Liam rubbed his eyes and leaned back into his seat. He looked exhausted.

"Yes, I understand that, but clearly he's been planning something all summer especially if tomorrow is his last day to do so. What could he be doing?" Kiku rubbed his chin in thought.

"Best guess is Peter." Alfred sighed. "The little twerp is in his debt, Marius is going to want his soul."

"I'm not doubting that." Liam placed his right ankle on his left knee and started to shake his leg up and down. "But it's never taken him this long before, I'm sure he's got something *big* planned, but what?"

Nobody spoke. Matthew's eyes started to droop a little as his energy was starting to crash. He yawned and rubbed his eye in an attempt to keep himself awake. Hard to believe that just this morning Máximo was yelling at him about Gilbert, that felt like it was a week ago.

Liam and Alfred started to speak softly about what they should do next.

The sound of rustling papers made Matthew turn his head lazily towards Kiku. Kiku was looking through the files. Kiku would take the pictures of the deceased children and flip them over on the table. He would then look at the files for each child.

When Kiku got to the last child he took one look at the picture and frowned. Breaking his emotionless stare for the first time.

"Everything alright?" Matthew asked as he rested his head on the table.

"Yes, Alfred-san-"

"-Matthew.-"

"Matthew-san. I apologize. I just... this child... he looks familiar."

"It's a small town." Matthew shrugged. "I'm sure you've seen him once or twice..." Matthew's eyes started to droop again and he felt his consciousness start to slip.

"...Where are my manners?" Kiku suddenly chuckled; waking Matthew up a bit more. "Come. Let me make up a bed for you two. You both look... rather exhausted." Matthew yawned and then looked over at Liam and realized that he was also on the verge of sleep. His head dipped down and he woke.

"I haven't slept since I left the ocean..." Liam sighed and stood slowly. "I don't care where I sleep, I just need sleep."

Alfred then spoke up as he stood with Liam. "You know. My bed is big enough, Mattie could bunk with me for the night. That way you don't have to pull out two sets of pillows and blankets."

"If you're fine with it. Then I'll show you to the couch, Liam."

"Sleeeeep." Liam seemed to half- cheer as he followed Kiku into the living room.

"C'mon, Mattie, before you pass out." Alfred lightly grabbed Matthew by his sleeve and led him down the hallway.

Matthew's body was slightly sluggish as he just fell into the bed after kicking his shoes off. Alfred took a few minutes to get dressed into night clothes but before too long he too was in bed. Yet, even though Matthew was incredibly tired... he didn't sleep right away.

Instead, he just stared at Alfred as his brother turned the lamp out. The two of them were engulfed in darkness. "Oh- let me just..." Alfred was gentle as he took Matthew's glasses off and placed them on the nightstand.

"...How are you taking the news? About us... I mean." Matthew questioned. He wiggled a little to get a little more comfortable in the bed and on his side facing Alfred. Alfred shifted so he was on his back.

"... I dunno. I mean... we always knew we were adopted."

"Adoption is one thing... but we're not even... we're human and Dad just kept that quiet *and* he wiped our memories."

"Yeah, he did... no wonder all three of us wanted to go to the land..."

"That's what I said."

"How'd you find out?" Alfred turned his head to look at Matthew.

"Police told me. I guess they found the news article..." Matthew wondered how he missed telling Alfred that part, but then again he wasn't running on a hundred percent. "You?"

"...It just... happened. I got a major headache-"

"-So did I-"

"-Then I passed out-"

"-Same-"

"Then the memory's just sprung on me."

Matthew just nodded and Alfred frowned a little. "Do you think that when you found out-?"

"-That Dad's magic wore off for the both of us? I do."

"... Should... should we go back to being Jackson and Joseph? Or..." Alfred trailed off.

Matthew's eyes felt heavy as the wheels in his head turned. Matthew tiredly rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands before yawning loudly. "I don't think so. That'll just be confusing for everyone... I think you should stay Alfred and I..." Matthew shut his eyes. "I should stay Matthew."

"Yeah, you make a point..."

"Tomorrow we have to focus on finding Peter."

"Agreed. Let's get some rest now, we'll think of a game plan in the morning."

As the door slowly opened the hinges creaked and Peter instantly stiffened in fear. He held his breath and waited for a couple of seconds. He listened for any signs of life. So far there was nothing and he took that as a good sign.

Tino and Berwald were both fast asleep and it was time for Peter to act, it was now or never.

Peter knew with these upcoming days Marius was going to attack, he didn't know how or when, but all he knew was that he needed a weapon. Any sort of weapon that was sharp and would hurt Marius. Peter thought about it at dinner time when he saw the knives.

Unfortunately while awake Tino and Berwald were often walking around the house either doing chores or working making stealing a knife a little too hard for Peter. So, Peter decided to wait until they fell asleep.

Peter was quiet as he tip-toed down the hall, being careful of any squeaky floorboards. Thank goodness they have nightlights in the hallway. So at least Peter wasn't bumbling around in the dark-

Peter felt his heart stop when his shoulder brushed up against the picture on the wall and it nearly fell. His reflexes kicked in just in time before the picture hit the ground. Still, Peter felt

his soul leave his body for several seconds as he just stood there with this picture in his hands.

Peter tried to listen past his thumping heart. He heard nothing around him so he carefully, and rather blindly, tried to hang the picture back up. Once he got it on the nail and it looked straight Peter sighed in relief. He would have been absolutely guilt-ridden if he accidentally broke the picture, it seemed to be the one Tino and Berwald loved the most with the little red-headed boy... Sven was his name.

Peter knew only the basics of Sven, and he knew that Tino and Berwald loved Sven... a lot.

With a shake of his head, Peter started towards the kitchen. He stayed quiet as his feet padded against the carpeted floor. Until he felt the cold tile of the kitchen floor. Now, there was a nightlight in the kitchen as well, so thankfully, it gave off *just* enough light for Peter to see the knife holder. It was tucked away next to the fridge on the countertop. Peter walked up and went to grab the first steak knife he saw but paused.

"One...two...three..." Peter whispered as he counted the knives off. There were five knives in total, and with the way, they were placed Tino or Berwald would *for sure* notice if one went missing. So, Peter backed off as he thought of a new plan. Peter swallowed hard and thought about maybe going for something that won't be missed, like a fork...

But could he *really* hurt Marius with a fork of all things?

'Well... didn't Berwald mention something about the things he works with being sharp?'

Berwald's workshop was in the garage, but he made it clear that he absolutely *did not* want Peter down there without him or Tino knowing. *'Because the objects he works with... are sharp.'*

'Yeah, but... wouldn't Berwald notice one of his tools missing?' Peter switched gears as he thought about it. He didn't stay down there watching Berwald for long, but from what he did see Berwald had a whole big toolbox of chisels...

It was worth a shot to look at.

So, Peter was rather timid as he walked over to the stairs, he grasped the railing and then just stood there at the top of the stairs. Looking down at the staircase made him shiver as it was just pitch black. Peter swallowed a lump in his throat and took one step down. Then another, then another. Soon he was down only the first set of stairs. These stairs led to the front door, no, he needed to go down the second set of stairs to get to the garage. It was shorter, but darker with no lights.

He stared at those second set of stairs intensely. They almost couldn't even be seen; it was that dark down there. So, with only the guardrail as his guide, Peter went down step by step. Goosebumps started to rise against his arms the farther down he went. His heart raced with fear the more he walked. . He eventually made it to the bottom, but not before almost overstepping the invisible step and having a heart attack.

Peter placed his hand on his chest but then blindly fumbled around in the dark for the doorknob. After almost a whole minute of him rubbing the door every which way he found felt the cold metal and grasped it. Peter was quiet as he opened the door and was met with more darkness, the light switch was on the other side.

So, more blind fumbling as Peter tried to find the light switch on the wall. He did eventually find it and squinted as the light invaded his eyes. It took a couple of seconds for him to clearly see inside the garage. It had a desolate and cold feel to it without Berwald down here carving away.

Berwald's creation, a hand-carved coffee table, sat in the middle of the garage. Sawdust and wood shavings littered the floor around the half-finished table. Peter walked around the table and over to the big blue toolbox.

The toolbox was about the same size that he was and had many compartments, and it was on wheels for easy transportation if needed. Peter had to stand on his toes to peek into the first drawer at the top. They laid the chisels neatly in a row one by one. No way Peter could take one without Berwald noticing.

Sadly, it seemed that the next drawer was the same way, this one with hooks, laid neatly in order. In fact, by the third drawer, which consisted of knives, Peter was noticing that Berwald had placed each item by their brand. One brand with some sort of gibberish written on it was always upfront.

Down he went hoping for something, anything, to use as a weapon. Drawer by drawer he was coming up empty.

That was until he got to the very bottom. His last hope was the bottom drawer and when he opened it he was met with a pouch of sorts that was rolled up into a tube. Peter tilted his head because this looked to be a little too small for Berwald's hands. With careful handling, Peter picked it up. It was surprisingly heavy.

The tube was tied at the end by two dainty strings that were tied in a bow. Peter also noted the amount of dust that came off on his hand.

Meaning: whatever this was hasn't been touched for some time. So, Peter took it upon himself to untie the strings and unroll it. The first thing he noticed was that it was a woodworking set much like Berwald's, but the handles were made for smaller hands, like a child's.

It then did Peter see the birthday card that was warped as it was shoved in the tube for some time.

"... I see..." Peter sighed, he didn't even need to look at the card. He curled his legs under his thighs as he sat there and stared at the sharp tools that would probably never be used. *'Am I really going to do this?'* he wondered as he grabbed a chisel from the pouch. Peter ran his thumb over the tip and he got a little scratch as a result.

It was almost too perfect to pass up. Berwald clearly either forgot about it or just couldn't bring himself to look at it.

Peter shook his head and looked at the ceiling. "I'll return it. I promise." With that he placed the chisel in his nightshirt pocket and rolled the kit back into the tube shape, making sure to be delicate around the card.

Peter put the tube back in the exact same place and quietly shut the drawer. Peter then shut out the light, shut the door, went back up the steps, and finally was able to go back into the bedroom and get some much-needed sleep.

Joseph shivered where he sat. The water was cold and dark. His clothes were soaked and the air, what little there was, was foul-smelling. He didn't know if he and his brothers were blessed or cursed. When the boat had fallen it fell over them. Joseph was sure they were dead even after they had fallen into the water. But the boat had created an air bubble in the captain's quarters. They managed to swim here with Thomas in tow. They were able to stay on the waterlogged bed but... they couldn't get out or see for that matter.

All three of them should be dead, but by some miracle, they lived. But... for how long?

Jack let out a wheezing cough and held Thomas close to his body. Their baby brother was fussy, at first, but the longer they stayed down here the less fussy he became. He seemed to just sleep; when he wasn't asleep he would fuss for a bit before falling back asleep. It wasn't healthy. Joseph knew that Thomas wouldn't last too much longer down here.

How long have they even been down here, surviving solely on a canteen they just happened to find and a packet of hard candies? They wouldn't live much longer as the water was running low and they had only three candies left. For Thomas, who couldn't have the hard candies they had to improvise in a rather... gross way.

Jack knew a bit about birds...

One of them would chew the candies and give the mush to Thomas in their hands. Mother birding wasn't something Jack or Joseph ever thought they would be doing. But they had to keep their baby brother alive. They just had to.

Thank god, Thomas wasn't developing memories yet.

"We're going to die down here, aren't we?" Jack had asked out of the blue. Thomas was now shifted so the toddler was in Joseph's lap.

"..." Joseph couldn't say anything, what could he even say? He sat at the foot of the bed and looked into the dark murky waters. He wanted nothing more than to jump into the water and swim away from this boat.

Joseph had tried to swim out of the room before. He was stopped by one major problem. The water was absolutely pitch black down there. There was no way he could navigate his way out into the ocean with no light.

As much as he hated to say it, he gave up on ever seeing the sunlight again.

Jack started to sob softly. Weak and feeble coughs left his mouth with every sob. "I don't want to die..." he whimpered. At that, Joseph shifted on the bed and crawled over to his brothers. Jack covered his face in his hands and pressed his head into Joseph's shoulder.

For a long while, the only sounds that could be heard were the waves crashing against the boat, and Jack's crying/coughing. Joseph couldn't even think of anything to say to help calm his twin down at that moment. He stared at the wet duvet he was sitting on. His body was weak and his mind was becoming sluggish.

Eventually, Jack's sobbing quieted down and all he could do was sniffle occasionally. "At... at least I'll be with you." Jack managed to choke out as he grabbed Joseph's hand tightly. "I'll be with you and Thomas...I won't be alone..."

There was some comfort to that, Joseph couldn't lie. So, he took Jack's hand into his own and pressed himself tightly against his twin.

It was only seconds after it happened; Jack let out a startled gasp. "Joseph-!" That startled tone in Jack's voice made Joseph's head whip towards where Jack was looking.

Joseph thought he was going crazy when he saw a person in the water. Not a whole person, but just a face. They kept the lower half of their face in the water, so all Joseph saw were their eyes and hair color.

They had laughably massive eyebrows, straw-colored hair, and the greenest eyes Joseph had ever seen. Their eyes were wide as they looked at the boys like he wasn't expecting them. This sparked something in Joseph as he crawled to the end of the bed again to get a better look. When he got to the end of the bed the man swam back. For a moment Joseph was afraid that this man was going to leave.

"No!" Joseph cried before he could stop himself. "Don't go!... Please!" His plea worked. The man stayed. "Are you part of the National Guard?"

There was a pause before the man slowly shook his head. The water rippled around his movements.

Joseph looked back at Jack. Jack shifted Thomas again before awkwardly sliding his body down towards the end of the bed. "W-Well, could you contact them? Please! We're all alone-" Joseph couldn't stop the tears from falling down his face. "-And cold, and hungry... and... we're going to die down here, mister."

There was a moment of silence. Then, just like that, the man was gone.

When he didn't pop back up right away. The two brothers decided to chalk it up to a shared delusion. That was until a couple of hours later when the man returned. Like before he kept the bottom half of his face hidden in the water. He said nothing as, rather suddenly, he chucked a full water bottle at them. They hardly had time to react when he chucked a lunchbox, clasped and sealed, at them next.

Joseph opened the lunchbox with shaky hands. In it was a sandwich that was cut in half wrapped in a plastic baggy, a bag of chips, and some grapes. How all of these stayed dry was beyond him. "Uh, Thanks- oh." The man was gone.

*Still, **food!** actual food!*

So, without questioning a thing for the time being he took half a sandwich and gave Jack the other half. Jack woke Thomas and for the first time in what had to be days, they ate something half-way decent. The sandwich was gone in seconds. Joseph would bite half of the grapes. He ate the half he bit and fed the other halves to Thomas.

They, thankfully, didn't have to mama bird it for Thomas as he could eat half grapes and small bites of sandwiches. They decided not to feed him the chips and instead decided to save the chips, just in case the man wouldn't return.

The water was fresh from the bottle and not salty. It tasted like heaven. They savored as much as they could before capping it back and rationing it out throughout the day and night.

With actual food in his stomach, Thomas was acting a bit more lively. He clapped and demanded to be played with. The twins obliged to his wishes and eventually they all fell asleep with a bit more food in their stomach, happy that they could survive, if only for a little while longer. With hope of the National Guard on it's way.

The visits became regular with the strange man. At first, he always kept his distance, never showing his full face and when he would bring them food he always threw the food at them like he didn't want them to touch him. He always gave them bottled water and lunch boxes. The twins could never figure out where this man was getting these lunch boxes from. But they weren't complaining. Once the man even brought them soup from a thermos and it was still hot.

One day Thomas, being a restless fussy toddler just couldn't sit still. He wiggled and twisted until he was free of Jack's grasp. Thomas was happy to welcome the strange man. He actually tried to reach out to the man, but the man backed up completely in fear. He even went as far as to push himself up against the wall.

His body language was loud and clear as was the fear in his eyes. He was afraid of them.

"Are you human, mister?" Jack had the courage to ask one day as he grabbed the water bottle from the air.

The man didn't answer. He never did.

As the days dwindled on things weren't the best still. They were stuck in this place and Jack showed no sign of getting better. What was worse? Thomas was getting sicker now. If he wasn't asleep, he would wail and cry his little lungs out.

"Please," Joseph remembered wheezing out when the strange man returned, ready to chuck the food at them like usual. "I know you mean well, but they're sick. Can you please contact

someone to save us?" Joseph whispered to the strange man as he pointed to his brothers as they slept.

The man looked at the two brothers before he lifted his head out of the water to get a better look at them. He then looked at Joseph.

"... I've tried." Joseph almost couldn't believe it when the man spoke to him. The man frowned. Joseph crawled over to the edge of the bed. "Nobody will listen to me...so... food." The man showed his lunch box.

"Can't you get us to the surface? Clearly, there's a way out of here, right?"

"The surface is too high up. Your little lungs couldn't make the swim. That and if I were to assist you, you'd still get sick. I believe it's called the...bends?"

"Then how come you don't get sick?"

The man didn't answer, instead, he reached up with the box in his hands. "Here-" before he could throw it, Joseph felt brave and simply reached over to take it, catching the man off guard.

Their fingers touched and the man froze as he stared at Joseph in shock. "Don't-" The man suddenly backed up. The water splashed when he did this. His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. "...Don't touch me."

"...Are you afraid of us, Mister?" Joseph questioned as he put the lunchbox to the side. He'd look inside later. "I mean, you throw the food and water at us, and always keep your distance and just now..."

"I'm not a fan." The man lowered himself into the water. He couldn't look at Joseph in the eyes.

"We're not that bad. I promise. We just want to get out of here."

"It's not you, boy, it's... nothing. See you tomorrow." With that, the man was gone.

"..."

Joseph would like to think that maybe, just maybe that interaction changed something in the man. He would show his face now and was a little gentler when it came to handing the food out. He still preferred to keep his distance. At least an arm's length away.

"What are your names?" He asked them one day as they ate. Thomas and Jack both coughed out horrid wheezing coughs that made Joseph worry.

"I'm Jack." Jack's voice was strange to hear as it was weak and hoarse. The man seemed to notice this as well. He was watching them all with calculating eyes. "That's Thom-" Jack stopped to cough. Joseph lightly patted his twin's back while he held on to Thomas's sleeping form in his lap.

"-Thomas. That's Thomas." Joseph finished for his twin. "And I'm Joseph... can we have your name?"

"No." With that, the man was gone.

Jack and Thomas weren't doing well at all, their coughing got worse and they've both become feverish, sickly, and worse yet, they weren't holding down their food anymore. Joseph wished the man would bring medicine or better yet, a doctor!

Yet, it was only him. He would talk a little, give them food, and leave.

But it wasn't good enough eventually Joseph fell to the same sickness that overtook his brothers.

Joseph remembered laying there in agony, curled around Jack's still form while Thomas slept between the two of them. He heard the man speak to them, but he didn't even have the energy to lift his head. He could hear the water rustle about for a moment before there was the sound of splashing. The man wanted their attention, but Joseph was honestly starting to drift in and out of consciousness.

"Lads?" The man's face came up to the side of the bed. He still kept his distance. "I brought food."

Joseph just coughed.

"...Lads?..." There was concern in his voice this time around. "Do you need water?" The man was actually shaking as he uncapped the water bottle. Joseph remembered blacking out for a moment, but he came back when water dripped down his throat and made him sputter and choke. He remembered seeing blood come out of his mouth as he hacked and wheezed every which way. His chest shook with every cough he spat out.

Joseph blacked out shortly after that.

Matthew silently slipped out of Kiku's sliding glass door. Neither Alfred nor Liam heard him.

It was only just shy of four AM and he couldn't sleep. He had awoken from his dream in a bit of a fit, but thank goodness Alfred sleeps like a rock. He only came out here to get some fresh air and maybe clear his head and calm his hammering heart. The dream had felt so real, then again, it wasn't a dream, it was a memory.

He was Jack and Alfred was Joseph.

'Dad...Arthur... whoever you are. I guess I'm starting to understand a bit more. He took our memories because he knew that we, as humans, probably wouldn't accept him as our parental figure. That and he figured we were dead to the humans anyway, why not start over.... But why. Why didn't you just cast a spell and bring us to the surface safely? I know now that the boat probably sank far, far down below the surface. But a spell would have stopped us from

drowning. After all, it's what you used to keep that food dry.' Matthew thought as he walked over to the fence.

He placed his arms on the edge of the fence and looked at the pretty flowers. He knew better than to pick them this time around. But, there was no harm in looking.

There were bright lights suddenly that made Matthew squint his eyes in shock. Gilbert's car pulled up to the driveway and soon the lights were turned off. Matthew watched as Gilbert came out of his car seconds later. Gilbert didn't see him as he stretched his arms above his head and then popped his back.

Gilbert grumbled something along the lines of: "What a day."

"Hiya, Gil."

Gilbert nearly jumped out of his skin when Matthew spoke. He whirled around before smiling. He looked exhausted, and when he came over Matthew noted that he smelt like fried food. "Whatya doing here, Birdie?" Gilbert asked as he leaned against the fence.

"I found one of my brothers. I'm just staying the night."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah... what are you doing coming home this late."

"I'm always a closer on Sundays," Gilbert explained. Matthew nodded in understanding. "So, are you just getting to bed? Or just waking up?" Gilbert asked.

"Waking up. I had a nightmare."

"Oh, that's a shame. Do you want to come over to my place? I have to stay up till eight to take Luddy to school; I could use the company."

"Sure." Matthew hopped over the fence.

"There's a door to the fence, you know?" Gilbert smiled as he started to walk towards his apartment. Matthew frowned, he didn't know that actually.

Gilbert unlocked the front door and let Matthew in first. "Coffee?" Gilbert offered.

"Sure, sounds nice."

Matthew sat at the table while Gilbert got the coffee pot going. Gilbert then took a seat next to Matthew. "So, one brother down, one more to go, right?" Gilbert sleepily asked.

Matthew smiled a little. "That's the plan."

"You know, thinking back on it, I think I saw your twin first hand. That day you ran to the beach? I remember seeing him inside Kiku's house, but I kinda forgot about it until now."

"That's fine."

Gilbert hummed in thought before he leaned back against his chair. He balanced it on two legs and rubbed his tired eyes. "So, staying the night at Kiku's. Máximo allowed this?" Gilbert inquired as he looked at Matthew. Matthew frowned and he knew Gilbert saw this because Gilbert arched an eyebrow.

"Not exactly..." Matthew swallowed, his throat started to tighten and turn dry.

Gilbert sighed and stood up to get himself a cup of coffee. "I know," Gilbert explained as he poured the coffee into two mugs. Matthew wasn't expecting that answer. "Máximo visited my work a while ago. Asking if I've seen you. So. Spill. What's happening?" Gilbert almost demanded as he placed the coffee in front of Matthew. Gilbert took his seat again and sipped the coffee while waiting for an answer.

Matthew's mouth twitched before he sighed. He watched the steam from his coffee swirl around in the air for a few seconds. "A lot. More than a lot. Too much really." Matthew brought the mug to his mouth and took a sip. He grimaced at the bitter taste of the coffee. It was then that he decided he wasn't a fan of this drink.

"That's not gonna cut it, Birdie. I want details. Why are you running from the police all of the sudden?"

Matthew put the mug down on the table. "... Because at the moment the police can't be trusted."

"Even Máxi?"

"... Yes, though it's not him, per-se."

"Then what is it?"

"You wouldn't believe me," Matthew spoke before he could stop himself. But it was the truth. No human would ever believe that there was a shapeshifting Merman running around trying to collect children's souls. Gilbert would call Matthew insane.

Gilbert narrowed his eyes as he watched Matthew. He then started to rub at his eyes. Digging into them with the palms of his hands. "Okay, but you trust *me* at least, don't you?"

"Of course, as of right now I see no reason not to."

"Then why can't you tell me? Birdi- Matthew, I know you're keeping secrets. I know there's something. Something *big* you're hiding behind all of these walls and defenses that you've put up." Gilbert reached across the table and grabbed Matthew's hand into his. "I want to help you. Really, I do."

*'Could I tell him? If I do... there'd be no going back. But would he even believe me? No, I can't tell him- He's reaching out, he wants me to tell him. This will change **everything**, Matthew.'*

Matthew ran his thumb over the back of Gilbert's hand. *'Maybe he doesn't really need to know. After all, I'm **not** biologically a Merman... but... let's think about this logically. Let's say I leave the ocean behind when this is all over; pretend to be human. Could I ever go back to the beach and swim in the water? I don't think so. Gilbert would wonder why I avoid the beach or places like it. I don't know if it's possible for me to keep this a secret forever.'*

'But aren't relationships supposed to be about honesty? Did Francis know about what dad was? I can't say for sure. But I need Gilbert to trust me and how can he trust me if... I don't start explaining myself? But what if he freaks? Leaves me? Then what?'

'It's best if he knows though. Not just for my sake but his. If I tell him what I am then he can be on the lookout for Marius and protect Ludwig. Ludwig has a high chance of becoming a target. This isn't just about me and my secrets anymore. Innocent lives are on the line...'

"There's a lot to say." Matthew started off and shut his eyes. "So much so that... I fear you wouldn't believe what I would say if I were to tell you." Matthew took his hand back from Gilbert.

Gilbert sighed in defeat. "Birdie-"

"-So, that's why I think it's best if I show you."

"Huh? Show me?" Gilbert's head tilted in confusion.

"Yes." Matthew stood abruptly from his chair. He then offered his hand to Gilbert. He then smiled a little. "Don't worry, it's just to the beach."

Gilbert smiled a little and took Matthew's hand. "Not plannin' on mugging me in the dark, are you?"

Matthew laughed. "Of course not!"

So, with that, they started out of Gilbert's home, their coffee was long forgotten on the table. Matthew was trying to play it cool, but the more they walked, the closer they got to the beach. The closer they got to the beach the more Matthew was starting to panic. There was no turning back, but damn how he wished he could.

Matthew cleared his dry throat. "Gilbert?"

"Yes?"

"There's something I want to say before we get to the beach."

"Yeah?"

"Well... I know there's no going back after I show you my secret, and I want you to know... if you don't want to see me again after this... I will understand, but I *need* you to know this."

"Geez, Birdie, you're getting me a little worried here." Gilbert frowned as he tightened his grip on Matthew's hand.

The sidewalk was ending as the sand was coming up. Matthew could see the waves crashing at the shoreline just off in the distance. "I need you to know this, Gilbert, because... well... I need you to believe me about why the police aren't safe and why- Gilbert, the children are in danger."

"...You've noticed the patterns too? The drownings?"

Matthew blinked. He didn't know that Gilbert knew of the drownings as well. "Yes." Matthew settled on saying.

Walking through the sand, they were coming up to the shoreline any minute now. They stopped just before the tide. Matthew let go of Gilbert's hand and started to undress. Gilbert whistled when Matthew threw his shirt off. "I mean, I'm not complaining so far." Gilbert grinned and Matthew smiled at him.

Gilbert then slapped Matthew's butt, making Matthew let out a startled "Oh! Don't do that!"

When he was stripped down to his boxers he paused and looked at the water. "Please... just promise me you won't... scream."

"Heh."

"Be serious."

"Alright, I won't scream." Gilbert backed off and crossed his arms over his chest.

Matthew felt chills crawl up and down his spine as he stared at the ocean. The water moved in and out in a lazy manner. He took one step towards the water. One foot in front of the other. Closer and closer he got. The smell of the ocean was almost making him dizzy. His heart hammered away at such a fast rate that he was almost afraid he was going to pass out.

He could feel Gilbert's eyes on him and Matthew stopped and just watched the water that was almost right at his feet.

"Now or never." He spoke aloud.

Matthew then dived headfirst into the ocean.

The waves threw him off first. It's been so long that he forgot about how wild the waves could be underwater. He swirled in the ocean. Matthew couldn't breathe and the water still felt way too cold for his liking. As the waves pushed and pulled him like a doll, Matthew was starting to feel fearful the longer he stayed in the water. He figured the transformation would be instant, but it wasn't.

Then came the silence as Matthew started to slowly sink beneath the waves. He didn't feel scared anymore, in fact, he felt perfectly fine. The silence was actually soothing, human life was so loud and noisy that Matthew realized at that moment he missed the calming sea. He missed how *weightless* he was in the sea. Matthew stretched himself out and soaked in as much of the ocean he could. As he did this he caught his glasses leaving his face. He was quick to snatch those before they could get lost in the waves.

Matthew soon sank to the sandy ocean floor and he looked up at the waves above him. He curled his legs to his chest and just looked up at the nearby surface. The sun was just starting to rise as the sky above started to turn pink. He reached one hand upwards but didn't break the water to the surface. He didn't feel scared anymore, just calm. In fact, if he was right, he could breathe just fine.

Then he felt it. That familiar pull. It didn't hurt, it never does. It was just a weird pull at his waistline.

There were no dramatics, no twirling whirlwinds. Just a bright green light that engulfed his legs. When the light hit, Matthew removed his boxers.

It didn't hurt when his legs fused back into a purple tail it just happened in the blink of an eye. The light flickered so brightly that there was no doubt that Gilbert saw it from his spot on the surface.

Matthew looked at his tail before getting off of the floor. He inspected himself from every angle before giggling and doing a small flip into the water. He hated to say it, but a part of him actually missed this as he freely moved about the ocean, doing twirls and flips. Still, knowing better than to keep Gilbert waiting any longer he shot up for the surface.

Matthew broke through the surface and quickly used his hand to get his hair out of his face. "Gil." Matthew looked up at Gilbert. Gilbert had moved closer to the ocean and was actually in the middle of removing his clothes, he had just removed his shirt.

"Are you alright!?" Gilbert shouted in fear. Matthew blinked in shock. Before he could ask Gilbert continued. "That light! That was the same light I saw the night Francis was killed!"

"Gil-"

"Are you hurt?!"

"No! Gilbert..." Matthew swam as close to the surface as he could. Once he was able to sit comfortably enough he showed off his tail. "This. This is my secret." Matthew kept his tail close to his chest as the tide receded showing him off fully. "This is why when we first met I kept myself hidden."

Matthew expected cursing, he expected yelling for an explanation, he expected the works from Gilbert.

What Matthew did not expect Gilbert to just say. "Oh." In a deadpan voice as he stared at Matthew up and down trying to soak everything in.

Matthew *really* didn't expect Ludwig's little voice to suddenly call out "Oh, Feli was right!"

Nothing like listening to Sea Shanties to get into the mood! (Leave her Johnny and the Wellerman, as well as drunken sailor) I had a bit of fun with this chapter I was looking forward to finally having Mattie show the truth.

I had several different ways this chapter was going to go. But I went with what felt more natural and fit the best (Like a good point would be the boys were going to meet Lukas first, not Arthur. As Lukas wouldn't be so afraid. But I felt Arthur's fear felt more natural and something he needed to look past.

Also, to clear up any confusion because it probably won't be brought up. The reason why Arthur didn't give them his name was the way it was asked.

There's a story that inspired me with the boys, a real story about Harrison Okene! He was a cook on a boat that capsized and he survived in an air pocket.

Dawn

"-ir?...Sir?...Sir?! *Sir?!'*" Andersen blinked slowly as he turned his head towards his window. For Andersen, it felt like he had just woken up from a long nap. His mind was groggy and his eyes felt unbelievably heavy. When he looked through his window he was looking at a disgruntled fast-food worker. The woman had her arms crossed over her chest and a scowl on her face.

"Are you going to order something or not?" The woman demanded with an angry sneer. It was clear that she was already fed up with her day.

"Uh..." Andersen finally glanced around at his surroundings. He was in his car, yes, and it seemed he was parked at a drive-thru of sorts, but he didn't remember doing any of this! When? How!? Why!? The last thing he remembered was talking to Eduard in the bathroom. Andersen scratched at his face as he tried his hardest to think about last night, but all that was just blank.

'Eduard had threatened to tell on me and tell Tino the truth about Peter. I remember that much.' Andersen thought for a moment as he continued to ignore the fast-food worker. He was trying his hardest to remember what happened after that but his mind was running a blank.

Andersen looked out of his windshield and saw that it was morning, dawn, judging by the color of the sky. How the hell was he missing the better part of a whole evening and night?

"Sir, if you aren't going to order then please leave the drive-thru! This is the last time I'm going to tell you."

Andersen, once again, rubbed at his eyes before sucking in a slow breath. *'It's dawn... dawn. Lukas and Emil!'* For Andersen, he suddenly felt an increasing worry for his roommates that doubled as the time ticked. He normally wouldn't worry about them, Lukas and Emil could take care of themselves, but this was different, it felt different.

Andersen didn't know why, but his absence of memory and why he was here in a drive-thru had to have something to do with Lukas and Emil

. Andersen was feeling more awake now and he turned the key. His car stalled but didn't turn on. Andersen felt his worry pick up as he kept trying but nothing happened. His car was refusing to turn on.

Andersen felt like a complete idiot as he started to realize that his car was completely out of gas. "Dammit!" He slapped the steering wheel in annoyance. This felt planned, purposeful even. He pressed his head against the cool leather of the steering wheel and frowned.

He tried to look for his phone, but he didn't have that on him anywhere. It wasn't in the usual spots where he would keep it tucked away. Not in his car nor on his person. Andersen's frown deepened if that was possible.

"...How long have I been here?" Andersen asked the lady who was glaring at him.

"All night!" She threw her arms up in frustration.

Andersen frowned and tapped his steering wheel. He had people he needed to call. A lot of people. "I see, you wouldn't happen to have a phone I could use. Would you?"

"Take your car out of my drive-thru and we'll see about it." The woman ordered.

Andersen sighed and undid his seatbelt. "Fine." So, he put the car in neutral, got out, and painstakingly started to push his car.

Gilbert was angrier about Ludwig being out of bed at such an early hour than he was about Matthew's secret. "What the hell are you doing out of bed!" Gilbert scolded Ludwig.

"Well, I heard Matthew talking about wanting to show you this secret, and I wanted to see if Feliciano was right! He was!"

"Wait, Feliciano knows? How?" Matthew cut in as he wiggled a bit so he was away from the tide. He knew he could change if his tail dried. Alfred had told him this.

Ludwig frowned at Matthew. "You told him, dumb-dumb. When you were drunk?"

"Did I?" Matthew put his hand to his mouth as he thought about it. He remembered telling Feliciano something he shouldn't have that night, but he didn't think he'd just tell him *that*.

"Yeah, he said you told him that not only were you from the ocean but so was your twin, your younger brother, and 'the nice man' who was your older brother. He also said you told him it had to be a secret."

"Yeah, Feliciano can't keep a secret." Gilbert sighed with a headshake. "I'm sure the whole school knows you're a mermaid."

"Did Feliciano tell you?" Matthew tilted his head as he looked at Gilbert. "Is that why you're taking this... a little too well?"

Gilbert scowled and kicked at the sand. "No. Feliciano didn't tell me. In fact, I haven't even seen little Feli since that day he tried to run away." Gilbert put his hands in his pockets. "I know I should be freaking out, I know I should be angry, but...I'm just not even that surprised. I guess because it all makes sense."

Matthew didn't even get a chance to reply when Gilbert continued by counting off on his fingers.

"Starting off: It's like you said. You kept hidden when we first met, and you've never seen flowers, that should have been my first clue. Then, when we met at the grocery store: You had on Máximo's clothes and claimed you had none of your own. You had no knowledge of the most basic things, like that wurst you ate sideways. Máximo informed me that you couldn't read or write. Your stories also never lined up quite right with me about your 'father',

oh the age thing as well, and finally... It was your sudden reluctance to go swimming that really tipped me off."

Gilbert sat down on the ground next to Matthew and there was a moment as they looked at each other. "But, Matthew, I do have to ask... are... are you and your family responsible for the drownings?"

"Heavens no! No! Gilbert! We're trying to help the children! That's why I had to tell you this! I want to help protect you and the children!"

Gilbert sucked in a slow breath through his nose and looked over at Ludwig. Ludwig came on over to Matthew and took a seat next to Gilbert on the sand. "It has to do with the man that tried to drown Feli last year and a couple of weeks ago, right?" Ludwig asked with a bit of reluctance in his voice.

"Yes, I believe so, but I should say, the man we saw that day, Gil." Matthew turned back to Gilbert. "He isn't who you think he is. This is why I had to show you what I am, so you could understand a bit more. Because I want to protect you guys! Now more than ever!"

Gilbert had a frown on his face. He then looked past Matthew out towards the ocean and at the rising skyline. "Alright. I'll listen, Birdie... but I have just one request."

"Yes?"

"...Can I touch your tail?" Matthew wasn't expecting that.

"Gilbert, you can't just ask to touch another creature's tail!" Ludwig gasped at the thought.

"I would prefer he ask than to just touch me. Go ahead, but you'll want to stroke down, like this." Matthew grabbed Gilbert's hand and gently pressed it against what would be his thigh. He then guided Gilbert's fingers down. "If you go up my scales might cut you."

Matthew could feel Gilbert's hand run down his tail slowly and cautiously. He paused when he got to Matthew's fins.

"Oh!" Ludwig appeared next to Matthew in a second. He looked a little more excited, but he didn't touch Matthew. "You have denticle scales! We just learned about this in school! They're little v-shape scales that are almost like teeth, they *shred* through skin! You must be half-shark!"

"Shark?... I guess that would make sense in some way. Would you like to feel?"

"Oh no, no thank you. I'm not comfortable touching someone else... shark or not." Ludwig blushed and Matthew respected that. "But... it's rather... *pretty* to look at. The color of your tail that is." Ludwig's blush brightened if possible.

"Thank you, our tails always match our eyes."

"Awesome... strange, but awesome." Gilbert breathed out as he relaxed a little more. "But, before I get any more distracted; you should tell me your story."

"Right, because-" Matthew paused and looked at the sky. "-We don't have much time. I'll start with this. You won't believe me, I don't think, but Dad didn't murder Francis."

"Mattie, I saw him!"

"I know... but I have reason to believe, Gil, that you walked in at the wrong time..."

Gilbert crossed his arms and scowled at this. "Elaborate? Please explain how my eyes could have been wrong."

Matthew frowned as he thought about it for a moment. "Well.. It starts with a man named Marius-"

"-What?! You're joking- Gilbert! I knew something was off with that guy!" Ludwig not only cut Matthew off but quickly turned to his brother.

"It would seem so... Birdie, I think it's great you're telling me this, but this information would have helped earlier. We ran right into Marius and honestly... if it weren't for Ludwig here we might have lost Feli..."

Tino cracked his eyes open as his alarm clock started to buzz next to his head. Still half-asleep, he reached over with a shaky hand to silence his alarm clock. Tino was quiet for seconds as he didn't even want to leave his bed to get dressed. Berwald didn't want him to either as his husband reached over and wrapped his arms tightly around Tino's waist. Berwald then pressed his nose against the small of Tino's back.

Tino could have laid there forever; he, unfortunately, had a job to do. A job that he didn't want to do. For Tino, all he wanted to do was just call his boss and feign sickness to get out of the field trip. But that would possibly get Tino fired and he needed this job.

So, with a heavy heart, he untangled himself from Berwald's grip. Berwald didn't even stir. Silently Tino shifted and threw the covers off of him. He was careful to make sure Berwald was covered up before retreating to the restroom. With his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he effortlessly made it to the bathroom, he didn't turn the light on until the door was closed. So not to accidentally wake Berwald.

Tino did his usual morning routine, showering, brushing his teeth and hair afterward, and then getting dressed. Once he was all ready for his day, he paused and looked at himself in the mirror. Tino leaned heavily against the bathroom sink and looked into his own eyes for several long seconds. "Now-" Tino poked at his own reflection and growled. "-Here's what's going to happen."

Tino paused and looked at his own face. "-You will *not* get scared. It's just a field trip, you do this every year, yeah, this one isn't to the philharmonic, but on a boat. But the children will be wearing life vests so you have *nothing* to fear. Nothing. You're going on that boat, and you're not going to let the children see your fear."

He backed up a little, puffed his chest out a bit, straightened his back, and squared his shoulders. "It's going to be a fun day. The children are going to learn and you... you're going to make it through it with a damn smile on your face."

With his little pep-talk over Tino kept himself straight and upright as he exited the bathroom with a newfound rigor.

Tino knew he wasn't really afraid of the ocean, no, it was a fear of losing yet another child, and what's worse, this one wouldn't be his. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if he lost a student to the sea. He imagined the pain those parents would feel, the same pain he's been feeling for the past year. How he missed his little boy and wished for nothing more than to bring him home. How Tino begged and pleaded that they found the wrong boy, that Sven would knock on the door any day now and claim he just got lost.

But Tino knew. He knew that Sven was gone and, unfortunately, never coming back.

The fact that he and Berwald were... slowly... starting to regain their lives back. He and Berwald were lucky in some regard as he thought of the other parents and how most marriages often end because of the death of a child.

He thought of the sad siblings who wouldn't ever see their younger or older siblings come home...

It was then and there, between the bathroom and the hallway did he decide it. That *no* parent was ever going to go through the pain he felt. '*Never!*' Tino made it his mission right there that he was going to make sure that if anything did go wrong he was going to do everything in his abilities and power to save the children first and foremost.

That is *if* this field trip was going to go bad but it *wasn't* going to. Not if Tino had anything to say about it.

He was going to leave his house, go into his car, go to work where he would meet up with Feliks, his friend, and the science teacher, and together they would rally the children onto a bus that would lead them to a boat.

And that was going to be Tino's day.

At least he hoped that would be his day.

Kiku's eyes snapped open. In his sleep it was like all was shown to him, not a dream, but rather his brain finally telling him why one of the children looked so familiar.

"I know him!" In a mad panic, Kiku rolled out of bed and scrambled out of his bedroom. "I know him, Alfred-san! I know the boy!" Kiku stumbled and nearly smashed into a hallway wall in his slightly sleepy state. Still, none of that stopped Kiku from doing something he'd never normally do. He slammed the guest room door open without knocking first. "*Alfred-san!*"

Alfred jumped awake. "Is the house on fire!?" He yelled and frantically fell out of bed in an attempt to grab his glasses.

"I know the boy! I know the man!" Kiku frantically rushed to Alfred's side to help him up.

"What's going on!?" There were heavy footsteps and soon Liam appeared in the doorway in seconds. "Is everything alright?!" Liam almost overshot the doorway but managed to stop just in the nick of time.

"I know the man who had Peter!" Kiku felt his heart race and his fingers started to tingle with excitement. "I knew he looked familiar, He's a woodworker! His name is Ber...Bernard? I think-ah!-it doesn't matter right now! My older brother commissioned him to make him dining table and chairs!"

Alfred wiped the sleep out of his eyes before he put his glasses on his face. "Well, that's great Kiku but we don't know where he lives-" Kiku put his finger on Alfred's lips, shushing him effectively. Alfred blushed a little at this.

"I'm not done, Alfred-san! That boy that died last year, the little red-head, I knew he looked familiar, but I couldn't place it because he was dead in the photo! He's the woodworker's son! I recognize him because he came to my house with his other father last year to pick up some fruit! His other father was asking me if I would commission some work from his husband!" Kiku explained as his adrenaline spiked. He was almost out of breath, but dammit, for the first time in a long while he was flat out *excited*.

Alfred took in a deep breath and sat on the edge of his bed. "Okay, okay, but we still don't know where they live-"

"We do! Alfred-san! The police report in the kitchen! They have the addresses of the victims!"

"This is perfect!" Liam spoke up next as he grinned excitedly. "I have to thank Mattie for grabbing those files before we left."

"Thank goodness, let's get dressed and go and grab Peter!" Alfred called excitedly.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask, that's sensitive information. Why would the police give them to you?" Kiku asked as he stepped out of the bedroom. He shut the door so Alfred could have privacy.

"Ah." Liam blushed a little and scratched the back of his head. "They didn't?" he confessed. "They accidentally left them on the desk and I just started looking through them to pass the time by, I think they just wanted me to see the pictures. The files were for the police."

"Ah." Was all Kiku could say to that. He then frowned suddenly. "Liam-san, where is Matthew-san?" Kiku asked as he started to look around.

Liam's eyebrows arched in confusion before he whipped his head from side to side at the realization. "I... I don't know. I thought he was with Alfred-"

"-What about me?" Alfred walked out of the bedroom fully dressed and ready for the day.

"Where's Mattie, Al?" Liam was the one to ask. Like Liam, Alfred's eyebrows suddenly arched up in confusion.

"He's not in the house?"

"Matt!" Liam called out loud enough for his voice to be heard through the small home. The silence was all that greeted them.

"Of all the times to run off, my dumbass of a twin chooses *now*?!" Alfred immediately switched gears and went for the living room. Kiku and Liam followed. Instantly Kiku took note that the blinds were opened to the sliding glass door. Kiku always shuts them at night.

Alfred threw his arms up. "Ah... I almost want to say screw it-"

"-No! No 'screw it' Matthew could be hurt or maybe Marius took him." Liam was quick to tell Alfred.

Alfred shook his head. "No, why would Marius take Matthew? Just Matthew, why not take you? Or me? Also, why would Marius-"

"-I think he went outside." Kiku suddenly cut Alfred off from his rant. Kiku then strode over towards the door and opened it. He walked outside but he didn't see Matthew in the garden or anywhere on his property. Liam and Alfred followed Kiku outside and looked around with him.

It was still rather early in the hours, the sun was up but there was still a slight twinge of pink in the sky. The early morning was sticky and humid mixed and with the sea breeze that made Kiku start to sweat a little. At first, he wondered if maybe Matthew decided this was too much and just dipped?

But a sudden bright flash of green light made Kiku second guess that assumption.

Liam clipped Kiku's shoulder with his as he rushed and jumped the fence. Alfred wasn't too far behind. Kiku was the only one to actually open the door to the fence when he left his garden. He didn't shut it as he rushed after the other two.

Kiku couldn't keep up with Alfred and Liam as they ran as fast as they could towards the beach. He wasn't too far behind them, but still. He was surprised with their stamina, then again they swam for almost their whole lives.

Kiku was instantly shocked at the sight before him. There Matthew was, clearly nude but trying to quickly get his clothes back on.

There also stood Gilbert and Ludwig. Ludwig was looking away from Matthew, his head down, with his hands over his eyes. He seemed to be blushing under his hands. Gilbert was looking calm about the whole ordeal as he just helped Matthew into his pants and shirt.

Honestly, if it weren't for the green light Kiku would have thought something entirely different was going on. Shame Alfred didn't think the same way.

"Matthew!" Alfred yelled in shock and rushed over. Kiku could have expected several different outcomes for all of this, he did not expect Alfred to fully rush and punch Gilbert straight in the gut.

"*Scheisse*." Gilbert groaned in pain as he doubled over and held his gut.

"*Bruder!* You jerk!" Now with little to no warning, Ludwig joined in the battle and kicked Alfred right in the shin. Alfred cried out and grabbed at his shin, jumping up and down in pain. But Alfred dare not hit Ludwig back. Ludwig was just a child protecting his older sibling and Alfred knew this.

Matthew rushed and grabbed Alfred's arms. "Alfred! It's alright! Nothing happened, I was just showing Gilbert...well, everything! He and Ludwig know."

"Your brother is an ass..." Gilbert wheezed; still doubled over in pain.

"You think that punch hurt?! Liam! Hit this Dick!" Alfred ordered his eldest brother.

"No! *No!*" Matthew was swift to nip it in the bud. Not that it mattered because Liam wasn't even involved, in fact, the moment they got to the beach he had separated from his siblings. Now he was just standing at the shoreline looking out at the sparkling sea that glittered and glitzed in the early morning light.

"Are you alright, Gil?" Matthew paid no mind to Liam as he helped Gilbert to the ground.

Gilbert made a face. "I think I'm going to puke..." he wheezed.

"*Hellllo?* Earth to Liam!" Alfred absolutely noticed Liam's odd and sudden behavior and stalked up to him. "The *one* time I need you to use that strength of yours and you don't do it. What the hell, man?"

"..." A breeze swept by moving Liam's hair in its wake. Kiku came up beside Liam and looked at him. He just stared out at the ocean like he expected someone to pop out at any minute.

"...sorry." Liam blinked rapidly. "I just thought... I dunno." Liam explained as he rubbed his eyes.

Alfred pouted and placed his fists on his hips in annoyance. "Just help me scold Mattie then."

"Oh, right- what are you doing showing off our secret!?" Liam flipped his switch and snarled at Matthew. "We're supposed to keep this quiet! At this rate the whole town will know!"

"He has to know, he's... well... he's important to me! And save your scolding, what's done is done. He knows everything, Marius, Petru, and Peter, all of it." Matthew was just as quick to defend his actions. "It's best he knows; the more the better! We have no clue what Marius is truly plotting."

"Look, I need to take Luddy to school." Gilbert suddenly spoke up, he shoved his hands into his pants pockets and tapped a foot against the sand.

"Is that wise?" Liam suddenly challenged. "With everything, you were told; you'd want to have your little brother out of sight?"

Gilbert scowled at Liam in response. "I understand what you're getting at here, but, in all honesty, school is ten times safer than here with just me watching him. At school, there are teachers, other students, and even police officers keeping a watch over him." He calmly explained to Liam.

"I agree with Gilbert-san." Kiku nodded towards Gilbert as he spoke. "As far as we know: Marius is still impersonating a police officer, not a teacher."

"But, He could use his status as an officer to get into the school." Alfred countered quickly.

"And just snatch a student? I don't think so. That would be ballsy, even for Marius. If he's going after the children he's got to be thinking of something more than just snatching and going, he could have done that at any time." Matthew was the next to speak as he thought about it.

Liam crossed his arms and shut his eyes as he spoke. "He's not planning on just snatching this time. He's planning something bigger, something more nefarious... but I'm not sure what and it's killing me."

"Well, today is his last day... I'm sure little Luddy could miss just *one* day of school? Right?" Alfred asked Gilbert. "I mean think about it, it's children Marius wants."

"Is it though? Maybe he's going after adults now? That could be how he's throwing you all for a loop." Ludwig spoke up for himself as he looked at Gilbert then back to Alfred.

"He did take Eduard...." Matthew brought up uncomfortably as he shifted a little.

"..." Liam sucked on his teeth and shook his head. "I just... don't know anymore... not even dad knows-"

"... Ludwig, what do you want to do, buddy? It's up to you." Gilbert was swift to cut Liam off before he could finish the sentence. Gilbert got down on one knee and kept a hand on one of Ludwig's shoulders. "Whatever you chose I won't fault you for. This is your choice. If you don't feel safe at school, I'd understand."

Ludwig paused and fidgeted where he stood. His eyebrows creased for a moment as he thought about it real hard. "I think... I want to go to school. Not just because I don't want to miss a day, but this *creep* has tried three times to hurt Feliciano! What if I'm not there and Feliciano gets snatched! He's my best friend, Gilbert! I have to be there for him!"

"Marius went after Feliciano-Kun?!" Kiku gasped at the thought.

"Yeah, it's like Luddy said, for some reason, Marius has made Feliciano a priority. I'll explain that when I come back. Just give me twenty minutes. And Ludwig, you're a great kid for

protecting Feli, he's going to need you."

With that Gilbert ran with Ludwig in tow. That left the four of them on the beach.

"We need a game plan." Liam smacked his fist into his open palm. "We know where Peter is, so right now we need to get him. Then we need to figure out what Marius is planning and how to prevent it."

"Why would Marius want Feliciano so badly?" Kiku wondered out loud as he watched Gilbert and Ludwig leave. "What's so special about him?"

"He's the one that keeps getting away. That's why Feliciano is so special to Marius." Liam carefully answered. "I think I remember saving him last year."

"Then I saved him a couple of weeks ago." Matthew came in. "And Ludwig was quick to stop Marius a third time. No doubt this is infuriating Marius to no end." Matthew couldn't help but laugh about it.

"Hm, let's go back to my garden, I feel like I'm being watched and I don't like it." Kiku almost whispered as he rubbed his arms. "We can wait for Gilbert there and think of a plan in the meantime."

"I like that." Matthew nodded with agreement. "I'm with Kiku, I feel like I'm being watched and I don't like it."

"-Ludwig, wait," Gilbert spoke softly before his brother could open the car door. Ludwig gave Gilbert a questioning look.

"Look, I'm not saying something is going to happen, but if something *does* happen and it catches you or Feli off guard I want you to be somewhat prepared." Gilbert's voice was soft but firm.

"How so?" Ludwig questioned. That was when Gilbert reached over and opened the glove compartment to the car.

"I know it's not much, but-" Gilbert moved some books aside before he pulled out his item of choice. A whistle, but not just any whistle. "This is a ra-...a *really* loud whistle." It didn't look like a generic whistle that a kid could get for a quarter, but was made of metal, cylindrical, and had an opening at the top; it was held up by a cheap thin chain.

"Oh, it's a *rape* whistle!"

"Who taught you that?!- Nevermind! Look, it's loud as hell. It won't burst any eardrums but it'll sure as hell scare off any reasonable person *and* alert everyone in the area where you are." Gilbert continued to explain as he gently lowered the necklace around Ludwig's neck. Ludwig took great care to tuck it under his shirt.

"Why do you have this?"

"Bah-" Gilbert scratched uneasily at his face. "After Francis's death... I kinda feared Arthur was going to come after me next. So, I bought this just in case."

"But now we know Arthur didn't do it."

"Hm... still, I want you to have it right now. Be safe, okay, Kiddo?"

Ludwig's eyes glowed with determination as he nodded. "Of course!"

Gilbert lightly ruffled Ludwig's hair. "Good, now go before you're late."

"Love you!" Ludwig yelled as he opened the door.

"I love you too."

Lovino was about to pull his hair out of his head. Lukas never showed for his shift, so not only was the Pancake House absolutely slammed with an early morning rush, but they were understaffed and it was up to Lovino to pick up the slack. While his manager sat in the office and did nothing.

It wasn't like Lukas to just not call in if he wasn't feeling well. Lovino figured that Lukas probably just quit, but whatever: it was more tips for Lovino as he tried to be the best server in the place, but damn this wasn't easy.

'I need help! I can't do this all by myself!' Lovino snarled as he ran from table to table.

"More water? Got it!"

"Ranch? You got it!"

"I'm sorry, Ma'am! Let me take this back to the chef!"

"Is there anything else I can get for you?!"

'I actually liked Lukas, at least he wasn't lazy like our boss!' Lovino could only think as he paused to take a sip of water in the back.

"Hey! The customers can't see you drinking, Lovino!" The manager suddenly barked. "Also, if you have time to lean you have time to clean! Can't you see we're busy?! Go!"

It was all so overwhelming for Lovino as he ran from table to table. He took their complaints and requests the best he could, but unfortunately, he couldn't keep everyone happy as some people were rather snappy about the long wait times, but most were understanding.

Lukas not showing up affected him more than that. Lovino was rather pissed as he was forced to stay two hours over meaning he couldn't see Feliciano off to school. It was then when he was forced to stay did he decide *'I'm going to Lukas's house for an answer.'* Doing so would be crossing major boundaries and Lovino knew this, but he was mad and wanted answers. This just didn't seem like Lukas.

So, covered in sweat, ketchup stains, and maple syrup, he clocked out of his job and sighed as he looked at his watch. It was almost close to eleven AM. He already texted Antonio to come and pick him up. So for now he just sat outside of the building and decided to try and call Lukas before he just showed up at his door.

But like his boss and his boss's boss: he got Lukas's voicemail.

So, Lovino just sat at the curbside and waited. It wasn't even ten minutes later when Antonio showed up in his Honda civic. Lovino was just as quick to get into the passenger side and buckle in. "We're taking a detour today. We're going to stop by Lukas's house." He stated simply.

"I know you said he didn't show earlier but is this a good idea?" Antonio asked but started to drive regardless.

"I dunno... call it an inkling or what the fuck ever. Something just isn't sitting right with me. I know Lukas didn't like the job, but he always showed up and never took off unless he was forced to. I still remember the time he came in with a cold... so this just doesn't seem like him." Lovino felt his face start to blush as Antonio gave him 'that look'. "Don't you even-"

"Aw, Lovi has a friend- ow!"

Lovino slugged Antonio right in the shoulder. Antonio yelped in pain and rubbed his shoulder tenderly.

"He's just a co-worker, nothing more nothing less. I'm just making sure he isn't dead, you hear?!"

"Okay, whatever you say." Antonio still had a grin on his face though.

"Also!" Lovino suddenly wasn't done. "I want to yell at him! I was supposed to see Feliciano off today before his field trip and I missed it because of Lukas!"

"Heh, you probably didn't miss anything important. He's just going on a field trip." Antonio said as he stopped at a stoplight.

"Still, he seemed pretty excited about it. I just... I just want to make sure I'm in his life, even if I don't win the custody case."

"Oh, Lovi, don't say that! You'll win the case!"

"Eh, I dunno... It's not a sure-fire win and I know Elizaveta will probably have some card up her sleeve to win." Lovino huffed a little and rubbed his temples.

Antonio looked at Lovino out of the corner of his eye before focusing back on the road. Lovino was quiet as he untied his apron and tossed it into the backseat carelessly. The rest of the drive was silent. Thankfully, it wasn't that long of a drive to Lukas's.

The first thing Lovino noticed when they pulled up was the fact that Lukas's car was still in the driveway. Meaning he was absolutely home. The second thing Lovino was quick to notice

was the front door. It was open.

Lovino's stomach took a fatal drop. This suddenly didn't look too good. Antonio and he shared a look before he slowly opened the car door. Antonio shut the car off and joined him. Lovino felt unnerved as he walked up to the open door. This felt like a horror movie and he was petrified of finding a dead body. He's seen way too many of those in his lifetime.

The whole area felt cold... lonely and just too quiet. Not a single bird chirped or squirrel chattered.

So, Lovino was hesitant to slowly push the front door open a little wider. He was expecting to see blood splattered everywhere, but everything looked just fine. "Lukas?" Lovino's voice was small when he called out. There wasn't a reply and that worried him.

"Lukas? It's Lovino." Lovino took a cautious step inside the house. When no ax murderer came around the corner, he walked in a little more. Even though everything seemed fine there were things that almost looked out of place.

For starters, when he got to the dining room he noted the child's backpack hanging off a chair. There were peanut butter smeared crackers sitting on the counter top that a swarm of black ants was eating up, and a glass of juice that rested next to those crackers that looked warm. Both of these things looked like they haven't been touched for some time. "Lu-u-ukas?" Antonio called out softly in the house.

Lovino turned his head behind him towards the hallway and that's when he saw it.

A hand. The hand was just outside of the darkened hallway and attached to that hand was Lukas. He was face up, his eyes closed, and his face looked rather peaceful. One arm up and over his head while the other arm was over his chest. He was wearing a simple tank-top and boxers, it looked like he was getting ready for bed if anything.

Lovino's heart jumped straight into his throat in fear. Lukas looked completely dead laying there like that. Antonio stood stiff as they both just stared intensely at Lukas.

"Is he-" Lovino choked a little. He felt too scared to walk up to Lukas's body himself. He didn't want to touch Lukas's cold lifeless flesh-

Lukas's fingers suddenly twitched and then he mumbled something.

"He's *asleep*?!" Lovino did a complete one-eighty from scared and frightened to completely enraged.

Antonio exhaled a loud sigh of relief. "Thank the lord!"

"You better start praying for Lukas!" Lovino rolled his sleeve up as he stormed over to Lukas's body. "Hey! *Hey!* Get your ass up!" Lovino all but screamed at Lukas. Lukas didn't even stir. That made Lovino a little startled. "Hey!" Lovino grabbed Lukas by the collar of his tank-top. Lukas's body stayed limp and almost lifeless as his head rolled back. "Lukas! Get up!" Lovino shook Lukas's body.

This time something did happen. Lovino watched as Lukas's eyes opened just a sliver. At that moment Lukas's eyes looked different. Instead of their usual navy blue color they were completely red. Lovino almost dropped Lukas to the ground in shock.

"Five...minutes...Emil." Lukas mumbled before shutting his eyes again.

'This isn't normal!'

"Dammit! *Idiota!* Get. *up!*" Now fearing for Lukas's safety, Lovino raised his hand and utterly slapped Lukas's face as hard as he possibly could. The sound of his hand hitting Lukas's cheek was the loudest one Lovino ever produced. The palm of his hand stung upon impact.

Lukas's eyes snapped open and their red color faded within seconds. "*Ow!*" Lukas screamed as he clutched his cheek. His breathing was fast and scared as he sat up and forced himself against the wall. "What the hell- *What the hell!?*" Lukas took one look at Lovino and Antonio and he turned furious. "What are you guys doing here!?" Seeing Lukas with more than a smidge of emotion was foreign to Lovino and he didn't like it.

"Oh, we were just in the neighborhood- Why do you think we're here?!" Lovino challenged. "You never showed up for your shift you bastard!"

"My- What are you talking about? I just got off shift an hour ago!" Lovino's handprint was starting to show on Lukas's cheek. Lukas rose himself from the ground and used the wall to help himself up to his feet.

"Lukas...what day is it?" Antonio suddenly questioned.

"It's Sunday... isn't it?" Lukas's breathing became heavy and almost frantic as he used his fingers to rake his hair out of his face. "It has to be! I just got off shift and went to take a nap!"

Lovino and Antonio looked at each other then back at Lukas. "Lukas... it's Monday. Also, we found you here. In the hallway passed out." Lovino was the one to break the news to him.

Lukas looked even more confused. "No, it can't be. There's no way I slept for over twenty-four hours! That's just..." Lukas stared down intensely at the carpet. "If that's the case then why didn't Andersen come and wake me or Emil... Emil!" Lukas suddenly ran for Emil's bedroom. "Emil was with me! Why didn't he wake me!?"

"Whoa, slow down." Lovino was quick to jump up and keep in step with Lukas as they ran to Emil's bedroom. Lukas nearly snapped the hinges on the door when he slammed it open. But it seemed his worst fear was true. The room was empty. Little Emil wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Lukas took a step into the bedroom and walked until he was in the center. Then he just... stood there.

"I'll call the cops." Antonio whipped out his cellphone.

Lukas didn't respond, he didn't even turn around to face them.

"What good will the cops do, *Idiota*? Andersen is a cop and he clearly didn't care or didn't even come home last night." Lovino responded bluntly as he looked at Antonio.

"Well, the cops have to know that Emil is missing."

Lovino snorted and looked back towards Lukas. "Hey-" Lovino tried to speak but found himself at a loss for words all of a sudden. The air felt weird, oddly weird, and stifling. Lukas said nothing and bent down. He picked up a plush Puffin that was on the floor. He then held it in both of his hands and just stared at it.

Lovino felt unnerved again. There was *something* in the air and it was making his nerves go crazy. He knew Antonio must be feeling the same way because he had yet to dial for the cops. The hair on the back of Lovino's neck stood on end and his nerves were starting to become frayed. "...Lukas... we'll find Emil, I'm sure he'll be fine-"

"-Can't you see it?" Lukas's voice sounded off. Not different. Just off.

"See... *what* exactly, Lukas?" Lovino was almost *scared* to ask that. He gave Antonio a concerned look before silently slipping his hand into Antonio's for some sort of support. Antonio squeezed his hand back.

Lukas turned his head towards them and Lovino's breath immediately caught in his throat. Lukas's eyes were glowing such a bright shade of blue that wasn't even humanly possible. "The sheer amount of *red* in this room! It's everywhere." Lukas snarled between clenched teeth.

Lukas didn't look human. His face was contorted in anger, and his eyes continued to glow in rage.

Putting aside Lukas's *glowing blue eyes* for a moment. Lovino almost thought Lukas was going insane. There wasn't anything red in this room!

Antonio held on to Lovino's hand even tighter but neither man could bring themselves to say anything. Lukas dropped the puffin to the ground and reached his hand out to pluck something from the air. From where Lovino stood he realized that Lukas seemed to have plucked a floating hair. Lukas held the hair up to his eyes.

The glow from Lukas's eyes flickered, once, twice, then completely vanished. A loud painful groan left Lukas's mouth as he suddenly collapsed to one knee and squeezed his eyes tightly. "Was that- no...I'm sorry... you... you shouldn't have seen that." Lukas kept the hair tightly in his hand as he rubbed his whole face with his free hand.

"What the fuck was that!?" Lovino flat out demanded.

"... You should leave. Leave this to me." Lukas stood to his feet. His knees wobbled a little before he straightened himself up. "Thank you for waking me up. Don't get the cops involved, this is a case that they can't help me with, unfortunately."

Lovino was a proud man, but he was also a bit of a wimp. So at this moment in time, he really didn't know what to do. He had two sides fighting like dogs. One side telling him to retreat and never look back. The other side was different. The other side was telling him that what he saw was absolutely crazy and he wanted to know more.

"Lovino?" Antonio asked in a soft voice.

Lovino crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, Lukas. Look, I'm not the strongest or smartest guy around, but I'm going to be stupid here: What the fuck are you?! That shit isn't normal! If you want me to just walk away like I saw nothing then you're out of your fucking mind!"

"You wouldn't understand!"

"Fucking try me!"

The two of them stood there and glared at each other. Lukas's hands were clenched into fists as he gritted his teeth. His hands almost seemed to glow the same color of blue that his eyes were just moments ago. "It's too dangerous."

"But you can't call the cops? Lukas, I know we're just coworkers and all, but... something is happening and I want to be in the loop. I have to be."

Lukas's lips tugged into a frown and he suddenly unclenched his fists and the light faded. "You'll never look at me the same-"

"I already can't. Your eyes were *glowing*. We both saw it." Lovino pointed between Antonio and him. Antonio gave a bit of a shaky nod in return.

"And the air felt weirdly heavy..." Antonio whispered.

It seemed to finally click for Lukas that no matter what they weren't going to back down. Lukas sighed. It was times like this where he wished he could erase minds, it would be so much easier than explaining.

"Very well. I'm going to have to give you the abridged version because time is of the essence right now..."

Midday

"You're doing it again."

Tino blinked at Feliks's words. He then realized that he had been anxiously tapping away at his leg with his hand for the umpteenth time that late morning. "Sorry."

The bus was *loud*; two classes mingled together and each student was talking to their friends. Tino made it clear he didn't mind the loud talking but the students couldn't be throwing things. Still, Tino popped his head up slightly to look out at the two classes. He already did roll call and it just wasn't sitting right that Emil wasn't here today.

"Like, don't be." Feliks shrugged it off. "Why that stupid principal made you do this is- like totally- beyond me." Feliks crossed his legs. The dress he was wearing moved up slightly with this movement. It was a nice dress, and something Tino noticed right off the bat.

No doubt this dress was Elizaveta's creation. It was made out of fabric that had different types of fish on it. It was a simple design, but not one their principal would usually allow, in fact, the principal threatened to fire Feliks over his dress-wearing more than once, but the principal wasn't here, was he?

"Lollipop?" Feliks offered a *blow pop* to Tino. "It'll calm your nerves."

Tino thought about it before shaking his head. "No."

"-Like- suit yourself." Feliks shrugged and popped the lollipop into his mouth. Tino watched as Feliks shifted the sucker so it was now in the corner of his mouth. "You know, Tino? If you... like totally- want to... I dunno... sit at the docks... I wouldn't mind."

Now Tino *really* thought about it. Feliks wouldn't stab Tino in the back and thus was true to his word... but *if* something happened to the students and Tino wasn't there-"...No. I'll tough it out... but thank you regardless, Feliks."

"Alright."

Tino crossed his arms over his chest and looked out the window. They were coming up to the docks, in fact he could see the fishing boat waiting for them. "Like, I'm upset at Tolys." Feliks suddenly spoke making Tino look back at him again. "He totally stood me up last night. See if I call *him* back. Tell me, Tino, how'd you manage to get a husband?" Feliks sighed dramatically. He took the lollipop out of his mouth with a loud 'pop!' "I'm never gonna find someone, I swear."

"I've known Berwald for a long while and we just clicked, and don't say that. You'll find someone."

Feliks stuck his, now blue colored, tongue out childishly. "I really thought Tolys was the one! Shows what I know." Feliks popped the lollipop back into his mouth. Tino just shook his

head and started to stand.

"We'll continue this another time, we're about to stop." He told Feliks once he was on his feet. Tino then turned to face the children. They're young excited faces gleaming with happiness as they spoke to one another.

Feliks stretched his arms above his head before he let out a soft groan. "Should you do it? Or I?"

"I'll do it-" Tino smiled. He then cupped his hands over his mouth and spoke directly from his chest. "*Quiet down!*" Tino yelled over all of the little voices. Instantly the noises died down and all eyes were on him.

"Now! Children, we're coming up to the docks. I want you all to be orderly! Do you hear me? There will be no pushing each other near the docks! Any rough-housing will result in an instant write-up! We will get to the docks and you will all line up side to side so we can get you in life-vests; you *will* keep these vest on, I don't care how good of a swimmer you claim to be. If I catch you with your life-vest off while on the boat it'll be both an instant write-up *and* a call to your respective parents or guardians, am I understood?"

There was a little chorus of voices agreeing with what Tino just told them.

"Good! And that's not all- Mr. Łukasiewicz?" Tino gave the floor to Feliks. Feliks nodded, moved his lollipop to the corner of his mouth, and spoke just as loud as Tino had:

"You are to be near us at *all* times! If we catch any of you trying to sneak away there will be punishment! This is a fishing rig, meaning it's going to be slippery, and there are going to be lots of machines around! You are *not* to touch the machines, and absolutely under no circumstances are you to *run*! You could hurt yourselves or you could hurt a crew member! Understood!?"

Another chorus of voices half-heartedly agreeing. Feliks frowned. "I said am I understood!?"

The voices got louder and Tino turned his head away so as not to let his smile show.

"Good! Now, this is going to be a fun field trip!-" The bus came to a stop and Tino frowned a little now. "Woot!" Feliks cheered before clapping his hands. "Single file everyone, line up!"

Like instructed the kids stood and went single-file. Their two classes inter-mingled loudly talked and laughed, but they listened which was good. Tino and Feliks were the first off the bus. Some kids thanked the bus driver as they hopped off.

"Line up, line up..." Tino ordered as he had every child stand side-by-side now in front of the docks. There he could see the captain walking their way with a rather large cooler on wheels.

"Captain." Tino took a step up to the man.

The man smiled at him. "You must be the last-minute field trip."

"Yeah." Tino had to stop himself from sneering. He stood straight, almost at attention when he spoke to the stranger. "What's in the cooler, sir?"

"Life jackets. I didn't own a suitcase big enough."

"Understood. Will you be driving this ship?" Tino asked as he took a good look at the ship for just a moment.

The man laughed. "Nah, don't worry, my right-hand, Yao Wang, will be doing that, sir."

Tino turned his head back towards the captain. He was of average height but had a bit of a gut. He held himself with pride. He had a scraggly patchy beard, and oily brown hair and brown eyes to match. He seemed normal enough, but he just looked... *odd*.

Tino crossed his arms and looked over his shoulder. The man stopped his walking and came back up to Tino. He gently put a hand on Tino's shoulder. "Don't worry, you and the children are in safe hands, sir- oh, you have a hair-" being nice the man plucked the hair off of Tino's shoulder.

"Oh, thank you-"

"Look. There's Yao now." The captain pointed behind Tino. Tino looked over his shoulder to see Yao stepping off the boat and coming their way.

"I know him-" Tino muttered the moment he saw Yao's face.

"You do?"

"Yes, I think he commissioned my husband for work. Well, I guess it's nice to see a semi-familiar face." Tino felt a smile suddenly creep upon his face. It did make him feel a little more at ease. From what Berwald told him, Yao was nice.

"Hm, Well, Yao should be able to help you guys finish up. I don't think I'm needed too much anymore." The man then started to walk away. "You have fun, Tino."

"Yeah, alright...weirdo," Tino whispered once the man was gone. He opened the large cooler up. As promised there the life-vests were. Tino collected a few in his arms and it wasn't until he started to hand out the vests did he suddenly have a realization: "I never told him my name."

"Marius... what's wrong with Pet-"

Marius roughly grabbed Peter's wrist and yanked him harshly away from Petru's sleeping state. "Stay away from him!" Marius hissed as he pulled Peter in closer. Peter's whole form turned rigid as he stared wide-eyed at Marius.

A few seconds passed between them and then Marius just smiled an uneasy smile. "Heh... sorry, he's ill, you know?" Marius relaxed a little more and let go of Peter's wrist before he

bruised it by accident. Peter frowned but stayed; a good sign that Marius hadn't messed up to badly.

"So, you want to be human? Walk along the sands and have two feet the whole deal?" Marius smirked as he asked. Peter nodded excitedly.

Peter didn't know the truth and it was marvelous. Arthur was honestly doing Marius a huge favor by keeping Peter's real past a secret.

"Can you actually do it?"

Marius scoffed out a laugh. "What kind of question is that, Peter? I'm just as magical as your own father, if not even more. It's a simple trick." Marius reassured Peter. It really was a simple trick of just undoing Arthur's original magic. Marius reached over and casually wrapped an arm around Peter's shoulders and pulled Peter in once again but this time in such a way that Peter couldn't escape from.

"Simple, huh?" Peter muttered, clearly growing rather uncomfortable. "It sure doesn't seem simple..."

"Well, it is for one such as myself. For you, someone with little to no magic, it wouldn't be 'simple'." Peter frowned and Marius lightly pinched Peter's cheek in mock affection. "However: One could argue that you finding me wasn't 'simple'."

Peter didn't look convinced. Give the twerp some credit as it was clear he was cautious of Marius. "Did I find you? Or did you find me?"

"Hm. You make a good point, but let's ignore all of that, shall we? Do you want to be human? Or not?"

*Peter perked up and nodded excitedly. "I **really** do! You see there are these people... they left these behind..." Peter showed off a pair of glasses to Marius.*

"I see..." Marius finally let Peter go and swam away from him. "You know this won't be free, Peter. Your father and I don't exactly 'get along' so to speak." Marius explained as he swam over to where Petru laid. Marius started to gently run his fingers through Petru's hair.

"What could you want from me that you can't obtain yourself?" Peter questioned as he tilted his head in question. "Human money?"

"Psh, what good is that here? No, Peter, I'm not going to tell you what it is I want exactly." Marius swam away from Petru's body. Peter was watching Marius's every move as Marius started to circle around him. The tension was starting to rise.

"Uh... I don't know. I-I really don't have much-" Peter pulled his arms against his chest as he squeezed the glasses in his hands.

Marius continued to circle around Peter. Watching him, waiting. "You actually have exactly what I need."

"What do you need then?... My voice?"

"Why on earth- no." Marius grinned, showing his teeth off no doubt as Peter shuttered uncomfortably. Nobody ever liked Marius's fangs. "What I need from you is simple. I'll give you a small amount of time on the land, but when that time is up, I will personally come to collect you. Do you understand?"

"But how could you possibly know-"

"Shush, little one. I have magic, lest you forget."

Peter frowned and rubbed at his arm awkwardly. "I... guess, there's nobody else I can really turn to, can I?" Peter sighed after he thought it all over.

"So." Marius leaned down and brought his hand out for Peter to take. "Deal?"

Peter looked rather uncomfortable before his nerves melted away and he took Marius's hand in his own. "Deal."

There was no way out of this cave. Emil checked every nook and cranny of this prison and unfortunately, he had since made peace with the fact he's stuck in here.

The barrier was impenetrable and made with strong magic that Emil was sure even Lukas couldn't break. There was only one spot that didn't have the barrier and that was a teeny-tiny pinhole at the very top of the cave that Emil couldn't even fit his pinky into. He only found that hole because of his clothes that floated to the top of the cave.

The sheer moment he was forced back into the water it was nothing but panic for Emil. After all, Emil lived on the land longer than he had in the water. It also didn't help that because of Lukas's and his secret he was never taught how to swim as a human would. For a good moment, Emil truly felt like he was going to drown. How ironic would that be? But then Lukas's magic kicked in and before Emil knew it he had his tail back. He had to ditch his clothes for obvious reasons and more or less how to relearn how to swim as a merman.

The cave was dark, say for the light from the barrier, natural sunlight couldn't be seen, Emil was that far down. It scared him in all honesty. He had no sense of time down in these murky depths. What could be minutes felt like hours and so on.

At least he wasn't alone...

Emil peeked over at Petru who slept fitfully.

There was something horribly wrong with Petru. Every time Emil looked at Petru his stomach would just drop. It wasn't just the fact that Petru seemed to be ill, but something else entirely.

Emil remembered playing with Petru when they were younger. So, from memory, Emil knew that Petru had dark brown hair. Yet, looking at him now Emil saw that Petru's hair was now blonde but also red in some places? It was so *weird*.

He also knew that Petru did not have freckles, okay, sometimes freckles can come in late, it happens, yet they weren't like normal freckles. He had just a random cluster of orange freckles over his nose, but then his cheeks were covered in brown freckles.

Petru also had a scar over his nose and that just made Emil frown looking at it. This scar was so similar to Sven's it... it hurt Emil to look at.

Then when Petru did open his eyes for just a moment before going back to his sleep, Emil saw that Petru's eyes were *off*. The color. It looked to Emil like Petru had several different colors in his eyes and they didn't mirror each other like eyes usually would. Emil knew *for sure* that, way back before he left with Lukas, Petru had honey-brown eyes.

Emil tore his eyes away from Petru. The longer he looked the more uncomfortable he became about the whole thing. "What did Marius do to you?" Emil whispered nervously as he started to gnaw on his thumb nail.

His mind ran wild with theories. Was Marius using Petru as a sort of test subject for his magic?

For Emil, who knew Marius as once a kind and caring individual who loved Petru with all of his heart, it just didn't make any sense for Marius to be using Emil as a test subject for magic. *'Then again, he did take over Andersen's body somehow... and kidnapped me.... I just hope Lukas got away in time.'* Emil sadly thought as he lowered himself to the ground. He held on to the hope that Lukas wasn't attacked or harmed, and that Lukas was going to show up any minute to save him.

Any minute.

Emil bit onto his lower lip as he felt the tears start to prick in the corners of his eyes. *'Don't cry, be strong.'* He told himself, but it wasn't working. He shut his eyes tight and tried to will the tears away, but if anything that made them come out faster. Emil hiccuped before sobbing pitifully. He was scared and wanted Lukas.

"M-...Marius?"

Petru's voice gave Emil such a jolt. Like Petru's whole body, there was just something *off* about his voice. Before Emil could do anything else Petru sluggishly peeked over towards Emil.

For a moment they just stared at each other. Emil took note that even though Petru seemed to be looking at him it was like Petru's mind was, for lack of a better word, *processing*. Petru just stared blankly at Emil for several long uncomfortable minutes before he finally looked confused.

"Yo-..." Petru whispered. "You're not- not- Marius." Petru managed to spit out in his confusion.

"Petru... don't you recognize me?" Emil decided to ask as he got off of the ground. Emil was cautious as he swam over towards Petru and took a seat right next to Petru. Emil then

innocently leaned in and smiled.

Petru's eyes dropped a little; it seemed like he was about to fall asleep again, but he didn't. Petru reached up and gently touched Emil's hair. "I... heh... how can I forget you? Em... Emily..."

Emil felt the whole world completely stop as he stared at Petru with wide eyes. Petru's eyes became half-lidded as his breathing became a bit more relaxed.

Petru never once called Emil 'Emily'.

But Sven had.

Emil's eyes trailed to the scar on Petru's face and felt his mouth grow dry as his heart dropped all the way down to his stomach. *'It's just a coincidence that they have the same scar... right?'*

The longer Emil looked and the more he thought about Petru looking and sounding weird and odd. It all just made Emil remember Sven's funeral. How his uncle Tino was yelling that he had to have been grabbed. Andersen had explained to Emil that Tino was grieving and not thinking straight and Emil believed it.

But now...

Petru suddenly leaned in and rested his head on Emil's shoulder. Emil felt the tears suddenly prickle against his eyes.

Emil never got to say goodbye to Sven; one day he was alive and then the next he was gone. He truly wondered if he was going crazy as he ran his fingers through Petru's multi-colored hair. He felt like it was insane to think that Sven was residing inside of Petru's body. "...It's cold and dark, Emily," Petru whispered like he was trying to confirm Emil's madness.

"...Sven?"

"I-I want to go home-" Petru let out a loud wheezing gasp and dug his nails into Emil's shoulder so suddenly that it hurt. Petru sputtered and coughed, he wheezed in and out for several seconds before ultimately fainting.

Emil didn't know what he witnessed as he just held Petru against his chest.

Sitting there staring off at the barrier; Emil was starting to think that Uncle Tino might have been right all along.

Berwald almost had a heart attack when he opened Peter's bedroom door as Peter wasn't anywhere to be seen. He had just come in to see why Peter had been so quiet for the last couple of hours and he feared the worst.

That was until he saw a little black shoe poking out from under the bed. *'Oh, he's playing.'* Berwald could only think. Though it was a little odd that Peter was

facing *away* from the bedroom door. Then again, maybe Peter was waiting for Berwald to go around the bed and grab at his ankle. Berwald just couldn't help himself as he quietly crept into the room.

"Gotcha!" Berwald called as he grabbed Peter's ankle.

Peter let out a startled cry and Berwald felt him jump. Berwald grabbed the covers and lifted them up to look at Peter. Peter looked startled. "So... why are you under the bed?" Berwald finally asked.

Peter had to awkwardly shuffle his body so he was now facing Berwald. "I...uh... was just wanting to surprise you." Peter nervously exhaled while he spoke. Berwald frowned, not at Peter but at how dusty it was under the bed. Berwald used his finger to make a line in the dust.

"Well... you shouldn't lay under there. It's rather dirty."

Peter frowned but complied. Berwald backed up a little to allow Peter room. It was like watching a crab as Peter used his arms and legs to scuttle out from under the dusty bed. Once free Peter bounced up and smiled gleefully at Berwald.

"Oh." Berwald hummed as he looked at Peter's shirt. It was all dusty now, which wouldn't be too bad if the shirt weren't white. "C'mon. I think I can find a lint roller." Berwald beckoned Peter to follow him as he walked out of the bedroom. Peter did just that. He followed behind rather closely, so closely that if Berwald were to suddenly stop; Peter would bump right into him.

Still, Berwald didn't let it bug him. Sven would have those days where he'd hold on tightly to Berwald or Tino.

They went into the kitchen where Berwald went to the junk drawer. He had to do a bit of digging around. As he dug around the drawer on the hunt for a lint roller, Peter spoke:

"...You told me if I were ever afraid I could go to you or Tino... right?"

Berwald stopped his digging for a moment. "Yes." He simply answered before resuming his search. He had just managed to find the lint roller and peel off the dirty tape when Peter resumed. "Well... there's this... guy. He scares me."

"Oh?" Berwald tried to play it cool as he turned. He then started to roll the lint roller over Peter's shirt to clean the dust off. Really, Berwald's heart was starting to painfully thump, Peter was finally opening up to him. "Is it the guy from the store?"

"The guy from the- oh! No. Not him. There's this other guy. His name is... Marius. He's rather scary."

"Is Marius your...?"

"My?... Oh! No! No, we're not related." Peter was quick to wave his hands frantically. Berwald was gentle as he brought the roller away. He waited for Peter to continue as he

peeled off the dirty tape once more. "He's... Well... he's a scary man, but I'm telling you this because he might come after you! Or Tino! So, Listen up! Marius has red eyes, brown hair, two sharp pointy teeth-"

"Slow down." Berwald put a hand on Peter's shoulder. "Now, why would he be after us?"

"Because he's after *me* and he knows where I am!" Peter cried as the tears started to prickle in the corners of his eyes. Berwald was starting to feel a little confused and decided to just let Peter continue. Which he did just moments later. "I... I'm in his debt, he helped me get here and now he wants me, but he wouldn't tell me what for and... I'm scared, Berwald."

Berwald thought for a moment. *'What did he do to get to us? Who is this Marius exactly and why would he want a little boy?... I don't like this. Not one bit.'* He looked at Peter and sighed. "Well, he won't get to you. He can try, but he'll have to get through me first."

"... but what if he does get through you?"

"Then he'll have to get through *Tino* and let me tell you, that's no easy feat, but Peter you don't have to worry about that, because as long as you're with us we aren't letting anybody take you away."

"You mean it?"

"Of course." Berwald gave Peter a reassuring smile and lightly patted his head.

"Thanks, Berwald, that makes me feel a little better."

"Glad to help. Now, I'm going to continue carving downstairs. Would you like to watch?"

"Of course! Oh, let me get something first." Peter smiled as he bolted for the bedroom.

Berwald got to the top of the stairs when the front door opened suddenly. In came Tino.

Berwald paused for a moment looking at Tino like he grew two heads right there. "I thought you had that field trip?" was the first thing out of Berwald's mouth. Berwald then quickly stepped down the stairs. "Why are you home?"

"I couldn't do it!" Tino cried so suddenly that it broke Berwald's heart instantly. "I'm sorry, Berwald. I just couldn't do it. They changed the field trip to a boat on the ocean and I couldn't. I had to come home." Tino covered his face with his hands.

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"I..." Tino paused suddenly before lowering his hands. "I didn't want to worry you."

"Tino..." Berwald reached over and wrapped his arms around Tino's lower back and pulled him into a hug. Tino rested his head on top of Berwald's shoulder.

Berwald felt rather content to have Tino in his arms... though... it was rather odd, the way Tino held on to him just didn't feel right. Tino was hugging him weirdly, arms up and hands

flat against Berwald's back. Usually when Tino would hug him; Tino would keep his arms wrapped around Berwald's waist.

Still, this was a stressful time and Berwald couldn't think of the oddity for too long.

In fact, Berwald's mind started to fog just a bit and he was having trouble thinking. It was the oddest sensation; it felt like moments before he would fall asleep: Where his mind would just wander around aimlessly and his thoughts would make no sense.

Berwald's knees felt weak, his body rocked just slightly as he was ready to collapse. "Ti-Tino..." his chest was starting to feel tight, and his head was becoming dizzy. He looked down at Tino. Tino was looking up at him, not at all affected by the illness that was suddenly plaguing Berwald. As if to prove this, Tino smiled at Berwald.

Berwald's body reacted before his mind could. All he remembered doing was pushing Tino as far away from him as he could. Tino wasn't expecting this as he screamed out in surprise.

The moment Tino was unattached from him; Berwald's mind began to clear. It was absolutely horrifying to hear the sound of Tino's body hitting each and every stair on his way down. Yet, Berwald didn't rush to his husband's aid. He only stood there at the top of the steps with his hand over his mouth in shock.

The stairs were carpeted, thank goodness, but it still didn't change the fact that Berwald had *pushed his husband down the stairs!*

Nothing looked broken on Tino as he laid face down by the front door. Tino's hand twitched before he grunted and used, what had to be, a lot of strength to slowly push himself up. Tino gasped and writhed a little.

Yet, Berwald still didn't move from his spot. "Why-?" Berwald groaned and rubbed his eyes vigorously. His mind was finally starting to catch up.

That wasn't Tino. Tino didn't have vampire-like fangs, and Tino's eyes *definitely* never glowed red.

Berwald's body reacted accordingly and chose to get the imposter away from him as soon as possible.

The imposter turned his head just enough to look at Berwald out of the corner of his eyes. He knew he was caught. "Okay-" The imposter forced himself to his feet and used the door as leverage. "-Perhaps I got a little *too* cocky there." Tino's voice was dropped as this man used his actual voice. He finally turned and Berwald saw the damage the stairs had done to this man.

His nose definitely took a hit; not only was it bleeding from both nostrils, but it also seemed to be crooked. One of his eyes had a cut under it and was already starting to swell shut. His hands were shaking violently and his breath hitched, showing he might have some internal injuries to his ribs.

That's when things went from crazy, to insane. This imposter's hand started to glow and his eyes turned red, as in their whole color changed to red. With his glowing hand he touched his nose and hissed in pain. Berwald only watched, his body refusing to move. Bones cracked back into place making any sane person cringe at the sound alone. "Gah!" With one final and loud **CRUNCH** his nose was straightened.

"What are you?" Berwald demanded once he found his voice. He tensed his shoulders and clenched his fists so tightly that he could feel his nails dig into his palms. Honestly, Berwald should have seen this man's answer from a mile away.

The man using Tino's face sneered at Berwald. "Call me Marius."

Berwald instantly shot a look towards the hallway. Peter either heard the commotion and locked himself into his bedroom, or worse, Peter would be coming out any second.

"I take it the brat warned you about me already?" Marius narrowed his eyes as he looked at Berwald.

"You aren't taking him!" Berwald snarled protectively as he quickly used his body to block the top of the stairs off. "You'll have to go through *me* first."

"Oh no... anybody but you." Marius, sarcastically, deadpanned and rolled his eyes. "I've taken on worse than *you*, big guy! Get out of my way! Otherwise your little Tino will be coming home to a missing child and a dead body!" Marius spat as his nose scrunched up in anger.

If possible, Berwald clenched his fists even tighter than before. Still, he let it show that he wasn't going to back down without a fight. Marius only chuckled, once again showing off those sharp fangs of his.

The attack happened so suddenly that Berwald didn't have time to brace himself. There was a light of red and before he knew it he was shot back. His back made contact with a wall before the back of his head struck the wall soon after and his glasses fell off of his face. Berwald's head wildly spun as pain radiated from the base of his neck.

Then, before Berwald could get his bearings together his arms and legs were suddenly forced to his sides by a red light. Berwald tried so hard to wiggle out of his now found binds but he couldn't. He was stuck like this.

Marius was soon in front of him. "You're no match for me." Marius spat before crouching down in front of Berwald. "It's cute of you to try, though." Marius then pinched Berwald's cheek like one would a child. Marius's free hand then started to glow. It was a game for this man as he grinned a sickly knowing grin all while using Tino's face to do it. His eyes started to glow and those fangs poked out once more.

Berwald felt fear start to flood through his whole body. Not just because he knew he was facing death any second now, but he feared for Peter. Twice he had a child and twice he was going to *fail* at protecting them from danger. Then he feared for Tino. His adoring husband to

come home; to find him dead and Peter gone... what would become of his sweet Tino after all of it?

"Don't worry, this'll be a quick death-" Marius started to say but then both of them heard it: The unmistakable sound of the front door being kicked in and breaking off of its hinges. Then came a voice. A voice that Berwald was sure he hadn't heard before bellowed out from the bottom of the stairs in a tone that meant business and nothing less.

"*Peter!*"

Gilbert could say being a lead foot most definitely came in handy right now. He pressed on the gas and barreled through the backroads. "Why didn't I think of this earlier, Birdie!? I'm such an idiot! I should have just taken you to this neighbor's house! I know where Roderich lives! It also is a bitch that he literally lives *next door* to this guy!"

Matthew sat across from him in the passenger seat.

While in the back Alfred, Kiku, and Liam sat in that order squished up against one another. It was decided that they would take Gilbert's car as it could hold all of them, and was already gassed up to boot. Matthew was the smartest to yell out 'Shotgun!' granting him the front seat.

Gilbert couldn't help but stifle a laugh as it looked like Kiku was gonna be sick. Gilbert wasn't exactly driving 'safely' as he turned so sharply that the wheels squealed.

Still, Gilbert did feel silly. The moment Kiku told him the address he recognized it immediately. This guy really was Roderich's next door neighbor!

"Well, there's no point in thinking about it! What's done is done, let's just focus on getting Peter!" Matthew spoke firmly.

"Gilbert-Sama!" Suddenly Kiku spoke up from the backseat. "I must ask: The main roads are faster! Why are we taking the backways!?"

"Because you guys are on the run from the cops and the cops know Mattie and I are a... couple?" Gilbert looked at Matthew for an answer.

"Sure!" Matthew shrugged. "Máximo knows Gilbert and I are close, and he already questioned Gilbert earlier, who's to say if he sees Gilbert speeding down the road; he won't put two and two together?"

"I guess you have a point-" Kiku was cut off when Gilbert sped around another corner. This sent Kiku flying into Liam's arms unexpectedly. Liam jumped a bit and quickly helped straighten Kiku up. Kiku looked as red as a tomato from where he sat. If possible steam would be pouring out of his ears. "-Must you drive so recklessly!?"

"Time crunch!" Matthew was the one to respond to Kiku this time around. Still, that didn't stop Matthew from reaching up to grab the handle above his head.

"So, what's the game plan again? Just so I know for sure?" Alfred asked suddenly.

"We go to Bernard and ask for Peter back." Liam firmly stated.

"And if Bernard says 'no?' Or Peter puts up a fight?"

"Then we take Peter by force." Liam shrugged. "Don't think I can't hoist that little twit over my shoulder. I've done it many times."

"Alright, pretty straightforward, I guess." Alfred could only mumble as he stared out the window.

Gilbert suddenly started to slow the car down. "Shit! Birdie, lower your seat! Alfred duck your head under the window! You too Liam!"

Matthew did as instructed and Alfred did so as well. Matthew only saw a glimpse of the white and green cop car before he was forced to put his seat against Liam's legs. "Sorry." He told his brother. He knew Gilbert's worry, even if it wasn't Máximo, Matthew was no doubt wanted for questioning by now.

Liam was the most awkward as he decided to go for the 'ball' and curl up. Because of Matthew's seat he and Matthew were, basically, forehead to forehead. The air became tense as Gilbert now had to drive at a more reasonable (but painstakingly slow) speed. "So..." Matthew hummed to Liam. Matthew twiddled his thumbs.

Liam raised an eyebrow in question. "...Why hasn't dad come to the land? I mean, he knows Marius is up to *something*, right?"

"Of course he knows. He's always known."

"Okay, and he knows Marius is on the *land*. So why isn't Dad on the land? I mean, It's obvious that dad doesn't hate humans, so that excuse is out."

Liam tsked his tongue in irritation. "Partly because the humans think he's a murderer-" Gilbert let out an audible growl, but held his tongue. "And mostly because... well... I think dad has something planned. I don't know if it's an ambush for Marius or something else entirely." Liam finished in a soft voice. "Regardless, I don't think he plans on stepping foot on the land unless he is *absolutely* needed."

"Okay, the cop is gone," Gilbert spoke and all at once all three of them popped up. Matthew nearly hit Liam's chin when he lifted the seat up.

"I have to ask." Gilbert pressed on the gas. The engine roared back to life as the car sped up. Matthew looked at Gilbert, but Gilbert was using the mirror to look at Liam. "It's going to kill me.... I *saw* Arthur with the knife! I took a picture of it! How can you say he didn't kill Francis?!" Gilbert's hands were shaking as he yelled his question out. "I just... I just can't believe it!"

Liam sighed. "I know my father. I know he's hotheaded, I know he can be stubborn, brash, and loud, but he's no murderer. I think you must have come up at the wrong time. That has to

be it."

"..." Gilbert shook his head. "I will *never* get it out of my head no matter how you try and twist it. He was standing there. Knife in hand over Francis's body, Francis had the ring in his hand! He had proposed to Arthur! Arthur was crying and all bloodied and there was just... *something* wrong with his eyes! They were crazed! I swear."

"I saw the picture... Gilbert is right, there was something off about Dad's eyes, but even I couldn't place it." Matthew explained from his seat.

Liam frowned and looked over at Alfred and Kiku, they both shrugged in response. "I never saw it." Alfred told Liam.

Liam rubbed the bridge of his nose as he thought on it. "...is it possible that you walked in on dad about to use magic? I know it sounds far fetched but before magic is performed their pupils dilate a bit before glowing... or maybe his eyes *were* glowing but the camera couldn't capture it properly?"

Gilbert frowned and focused back on the road. "I don't know. That's what's killing me inside... when this is all done can... can I talk to him?"

Liam's eyes narrowed and his muscles visibly tensed. "Depends-"

"I mean it! Look, I just want closure... it's something I hadn't realized I needed all these years later until it was forced back into my life." Gilbert sighed and Liam relaxed.

"It's not up to me."

With that last sentence, the rest of the ride was silent. It wasn't exactly a long drive after that anyways. '*Gilbert could be a racecar driver.*' Matthew thought as he moved with expert precision. Matthew was *sure* Gilbert was showing off when with one final move he swerved the car into a parallel park right outside of the house in question. The wheels squealed and Matthew felt his soul escape his body, but they were parked.

Kiku literally *crawled* over Alfred as he scrambled out of the car as fast as he possibly could. The door wasn't even open a second before the sound of retching could be heard.

Matthew got out and stretched his arms over his head. He didn't know what he expected looking at the normal two-story house in front of them. He looked at the address and confirmed that was the right address. He was rather glad he was getting better at reading. Then again, maybe his mind was catching up now that his memories were back.

The area was nice, quiet even. If he weren't on a mission he'd take a moment to soak in the peacefulness of the area. "Rich neighborhoods." Gilbert scoffed, clearly not so impressed. "Let's just get this over with before someone calls the cops on us."

"Why would they call the cops on us?" Alfred asked rather confused. "We haven't even done anything yet."

"Because we don't belong here, this is a neighborhood where everyone knows everyone. Gossip runs like fire through these homes." Gilbert made a face and then shook his head. He was the first one to walk for the door. Matthew was next to Gilbert in a heartbeat.

Matthew's heart was starting to beat harder. He felt his anxiety spike suddenly. The door was right there, just less than ten feet away-

"Wait!" Liam snatched Matthew's sleeve, and Gilbert's as he stopped as well. Then in one quick movement, he pulled both of them back so they were right next to him. Liam said nothing, but he was staring at the house with such intensity that made Matthew afraid.

Alfred and Kiku quickly rejoined the group. "What gives-"

"*Marius*," Liam growled in a low and threatening tone. Matthew felt Liam's hand tighten on his arm. "I've been around him long enough to sense *his* magic anywhere. He's here."

"Are you sure?" Matthew instinctively reached up and grabbed on to Liam's arm.

"Positive. The problem is that dad told me not to engage with Marius."

"Peter is inside, Liam!" Alfred suddenly came up, pushing Gilbert back as he did so. Alfred then grabbed on to Liam's other shoulder. He then tightened his grip and forced Liam to look at him.

"But... Dad knows Marius better than anybody-" Matthew quickly spoke up before his brother could. "I know Peter is inside... I want to save him too, but is there any way we could do this without alerting Marius?"

"Doubt." Alfred huffed at Matthew. "We don't know what room Peter could be in, for all we know, Marius is in the middle of sucking Peter's soul out of him right now! Liam! You can't always do what Dad wants! Sometimes the best course of action is the opposite! Besides bro! Marius may have magic, but he's outnumbered!"

"..." Liam scowled and shut his eyes for just a moment to think about. He reopened his eyes. "I-"

Everyone saw it. The bright flash of red flooded through the windows of the house for just a second before dying down.

That was all incentive Liam ever needed as he pushed past both of the twins, nearly knocking Matthew down in the process. Liam didn't even bother to check to see if the door was unlocked.

No, Liam ran up to the door and physically kicked it in. The door splintered before completely tearing off its hinges with loud *CRASH!* that echoed all around them.

"*Peter!*" Liam absolutely screamed before rushing inside of the home.

"Shit! After him!" Alfred called and the rest of them followed Liam's lead. Matthew had to awkwardly step over the door before he got to the stairs of the house.

Liam was already at the top of the stairs and vanished around a corner. There was yelling, lots of it, the unmistakable sound of a struggle, before another flash of red light. Matthew was nearly struck with Liam's flying body by the time he got to the top of the steps. Liam didn't go down the stairs, but he did go flying into a wall and then *through* the wall. "Liam!" Matthew cried and ran to his brother.

"Well... I didn't expect to run into you three today."

The voice was smooth, cocky almost. It made Matthew's skin absolutely crawl just hearing it. Matthew never met Marius, but he *knew* the person talking was in fact, Marius. Yet, Matthew knew he wasn't looking at Marius. This face he was wearing wasn't his. He just looked so *weird*, almost uncanny. Say for the growing bruise on his cheek. Liam had undoubtedly managed to get at least one punch in.

Next to Marius was a man bound by magic unable to stand, Matthew watched the man wiggle in place trying to free himself but it did no good.

Liam grunted and Matthew was at his side in an instant. Liam made a pretty good dent in the wall. White plaster stuck to his clothing and hair, and when he moved a cloud of dust cascaded off of him.

It was wild watching as Alfred, Kiku, and Gilbert came and made a semi-circle around the two of them. All of them ready to throw down.

Matthew was careful when he wrapped an arm around Liam's back and helped him stand up. "I guess we shouldn't have talked you into doing that." Matthew whispered to Liam.

"Alright, Marius! Let's make this simple; You're outnumbered!" Alfred pointed at Marius. "Do anything stupid and we'll beat you dumb! Back off now and give us Peter!" Alfred all but demanded.

Marius laughed. It was a genuine laugh that made Matthew's blood run cold. "You? Beat *me*? Do you hear yourself? There are... four- no, counting this idiot-" He jammed his thumb towards the bound man. "- Peter- and what the hell- Arthur's golden boy there-" He gestured towards Liam. "*None* of you have magic! If you think you can beat me then you're delusional!" Marius snarled the last part.

"At least we aren't cowards." Gilbert sneered at Marius. "You hide behind your magic! Without it you're nothing and you know it."

Marius narrowed his eyes. "Watch your tongue, human." Marius's voice became cold, venomous, and deadly, any bit of humor died within seconds.

Matthew pushed his way up so he was next to Gilbert. He was the next to speak. He wanted Marius's attention away from Gilbert. "It's true, isn't it! You use your magic to deceit and lie so you can take the easy way out if needed!"

Marius's form was actually starting to morph. The hair was starting to grow and turn brown at the roots, the eyes were changing shape, size, and color, and his facial structure was

rearranging right in front of them. Marius's eyes started to water as tears forced their way down. He wasn't crying, but rather it had something to do with the change in his eyes.

Kiku whispered something, but Matthew didn't pay attention to what was said. He just couldn't.

It was then did Matthew realize why Marius looked so uncanny posing as someone else. He was using his magic to keep the appearance up and the magic gave an almost 'shimmering' effect almost like-

"Camouflage!" Liam suddenly spat. "I should have guessed!"

"Enough!" Marius suddenly roared out. Matthew watched as Marius's whole body shimmered and shifted. In a flash, Marius's hands started to glow a familiar and angry shade of red. "I will not be talked down to by the likes of you-"

Maybe it was in his haste to get rid of them, or maybe it was because he was still in the middle of shifting his form, but regardless Marius made one crucial mistake. He forgot about Peter's existence.

A little shoe came out of nowhere and struck the back of Marius's head before a little body launched an attack. Peter did more than enough when he kicked Marius as hard as he could in the back of the leg. Marius cried out in shock and pain at the attack but didn't have time to grab on to Peter.

Liam charged and with his shoulder he rammed into Marius's chest, causing Marius to fall back into a wall. Marius's back made contact with several framed photos that hung on the wall. Most of the pictures fell, some shattered upon impact.

Matthew watched with utmost horror as Marius had grabbed on to Liam's shoulders as Liam did the same to Marius. The two had a power struggle. Marius tried to pry Liam off of him, but that did little. What Marius had in magic he lacked in physical strength. Liam was strong and he smacked Marius into the wall so hard that the rest of the pictures fell and a good-sized dent was left as a result.

Marius wasn't one to be outmatched and in a blast of red launched Liam back once again. Liam actually flew back into the man still bound by magic. Liam tripped over him and fell to the ground clumsily. Matthew's heart practically dropped into his stomach when he saw the welt start to form on Liam's arm where he had been hit.

Matthew and Alfred worked together to launch their own attacks. Matthew went low while Alfred went high. All Matthew knew was that he punched Marius right below his ribs with as much force as he could muster, while Alfred didn't punch, but used his elbow to jab Marius right in the throat. Alfred then kept his elbow against Marius's throat, no doubt pinning him uncomfortably against the wall. "You're gonna wish you hadn't done that, jackass!" Alfred snarled.

Marius gagged while his face started to slowly change colors.

Matthew heard shuffling coming from his sides and turned to see Kiku and Gilbert helping Liam, the man, and Peter. The man was free from his magical bindings, no doubt Marius couldn't keep focused on them anymore.

Matthew realized he should have been focusing on Marius and his twin when all he saw was bright red out of the corner of his eye, by the time he turned his head it was too late: Alfred's body was thrown right into his. The air was knocked right out of Matthew's lungs.

He didn't know what happened after that.

But Matthew knew he was unconscious for a minute or two because when he came to he thought for sure he was looking at an absolute *angel*. A blurry looking angel with white hair and red eyes. "-rdie?... Bird-Matt!... *Matthew!*" All senses came back to Matthew at that moment as he gasped in a breath. Gilbert was above him. He had a hand against the side of Matthew's head. He looked absolutely beside himself with worry.

The pain came only seconds later. The back of Matthew's head felt like he was struck with something hard.

When Alfred was thrown against him, Matthew's body fell awkwardly between a wall and a door. His head had rammed through a door. Hence his pain.

"-Marius!" Matthew sat up once his head cleared.

"Teleported away." Came Alfred's voice. Matthew looked at his twin. Kiku was helping him to his feet, Alfred was leaning over himself, holding one of his ribs. Whereas Matthew hit the door, Alfred's ribs struck the side of the doorway, no doubt bruising or even breaking a rib or two. Alfred coughed weakly.

"Are you alright, sir?" Liam was standing and talking to the man, and Matthew's heart dropped again. Where Marius's second attack landed left a trail.

Liam's shirt was singed where the magic touched and the black mark went up all the way to his face. Liam's right eye was closed shut as the magic left more than a welt in its wake. It was a *burn*. Thankfully, it didn't look to be more than a first-degree burn, still, that wasn't good, it was going to blister horribly and be uncomfortable to deal with no doubt.

This just got Matthew thinking, how often was Liam hurt like this during his confrontations with Marius? And how often did dad have to help heal him?

Gilbert helped Matthew to his feet. Aside from his aching head, Matthew didn't feel much pain anywhere else.

Peter was crying-no- he was wailing like he never had before. Because of this, all eyes were on Peter in an instant. He had his hands to his eyes as he was trying to wipe his copious amount of tears away. It took Matthew a moment to pick up on what Peter was yelling through his sobbing. He was apologizing. Over and over and over again.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! *I'm sorry! I'msorryimsorryimsorry!-*" Matthew was honestly worried that Peter was going to pass out as his breathing was becoming heavy; hitched almost. Matthew didn't know *who* exactly Peter was apologizing to, but at this point, it didn't matter.

It was Liam that was the first to react. He simply placed his hand on the back of Peter's head and pushed Peter into his chest. Peter sniffled and let out a soft "Huh?" in shock.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No." Peter sniffled again as he relaxed in Liam's arms. Liam let his hand rest on Peter's head.

"Good. But I hope you've learned a lesson in all of this, Peter." Liam looked down at Peter. Peter sniffled again and nodded slowly. "You're lucky we were able to find you before Marius could grab you. Or worse; he could have hurt Bernard!"

"B-Bernard?" Peter sniffled as he wiped his tears away. He then looked at the man. The man was quiet and seemed to just take a moment to absorb everything in as he stared intensely at a broken picture on the ground. Matthew watched as the man picked the picture up and held it gently in his hands.

"Did you mean Berwald?"

"Oh-" Kiku gasped before deciding to just keep his mouth shut as it wasn't the time or place.

"... That was him... wasn't it?" Berwald spoke so suddenly that it caused everyone to look at him quickly. Matthew actually decided to look at the picture he was holding. It was of his little boy, the frame broke beyond repair and it looked like that someone, be it Marius, Alfred, Liam, or himself, had stepped on it in their struggle. He didn't meet any of their eyes as he stared at the broken picture. Matthew watched as a few stray tears left Berwald's eyes. "He... he was the man that killed Sven. Wasn't he?" Berwald finally looked up at Liam in question.

"Marius... he wouldn't-" Peter looked up at Liam as well. "I mean I know he's weird... but he wouldn't- he wouldn't *kill* people-" A shadow casted over Liam's face as he looked down. Peter's face turned white as he suddenly let go of Liam.

"That's why he wanted you, Peter. You were probably next on his list." Liam finally confessed.

"Not if I'm alive!" Those words came flying out of Berwald's mouth. "I'm not losing another child to that maniac!"

"No offense, but you need to stay out of it-" Liam turned quickly to Berwald. "Too many people are involved as is. Thank you, for taking care and protecting Peter for this long, but for your own safety... it's best if you stay away."

Berwald opened his mouth, paused, shut his mouth, thought about it, and finally spat out his reply. "A...are you human? Any of you?"

"No worries, I am." Gilbert winked at Berwald.

"As am I!" Kiku cleared the air for himself.

Peter awkwardly poked his two index fingers together and let out a soft: "uh..."

"About that..." Alfred rubbed the back of his head and hissed between his teeth.

"Well..." Matthew sighed.

"No." Liam crossed his arms over his chest. "*We're-*" He pointed at Matthew, Himself, Alfred, and Peter respectfully. "-Not."

Matthew tried to make the situation a little better. "Well, I mean we technically are -"

"No, we're not, Alfred. You've been spending too long on land." Peter crossed his arms. "As much as I hate to say it." Peter huffed while he closed his eyes and pouted.

"Matthew."

"Whatever!"

"...He doesn't know," Alfred whispered to Matthew.

"No. I don't think he does..."

"Thomas wasn't making memories around that time, was he?"

"..." The twins looked at each other as they realized it.

Peter took notice of their whispering and pouted even more while narrowing his eyes.

Berwald sighed softly. "Forgive me for being so bold, but... I need to know. You mentioned spending time on the land... also if this Marius killed Sven then that means he also comes from the ocean-"

"Yes. Before you finish that thought. We're mer-people." Liam's elbow suddenly slammed into Matthew's side. A clear warning. "I'm sorry you have to learn all of this and I'm sorry about your son. We're doing everything we can to stop Marius, Berwald."

"We just need to know where to go next." Kiku hummed in thought. "Yes, we stopped him now, but clearly he has something else planned, right?"

"He has to," Liam commented.

Berwald frowned before suddenly perking up. "I know he was using Tino's form- shape? Face? I don't know... but he mentioned something about a change in field trip plans."

"Field...trip?" Peter made a face while tilting his head in question.

"What?" Gilbert spoke up, ignoring Peter's question. "What change? I thought they were still going to the Philharmonic!"

"No, he told me, using Tino's face, that there has been a major change. One that... I know Tino wouldn't be comfortable with." Berwald held on to his left hand as he started to turn the ring on his fourth finger.

"Clearly Marius was just using this as a lie..." Liam tried to shrug it off, but even he didn't look too convinced as he frowned. "However... just out of curiosity... what exactly did he say?"

"That they're taking the kids on a fishing boat out to the sea."

It was like a lightning bolt went through every single one of them.

At first, Matthew thought it was silly, no way could Marius get away with something like that... but if he had shapeshifting powers, and mind-control under his belt...

Matthew scratched his head, still... if Marius was doing this to harbor children's souls for Petru, then he'd have to be quick. He'd have to do something big to that boat to get it to sink as there's no way he could pick the children off one-by-one without the teachers noticing. Something huge like-

"Oh my god." Matthew gasped as realization struck him. "That's his big plan... he's going to capsize the boat!"

Noon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"..."

"..."

"..."

Lovino and Antonio looked at Lukas with different degrees of emotion. Lovino looked just plain concerned as he stared intensely at Lukas. Lovino had his hands pressed together with the tips of his fingers up against his mouth and nose. Clearly, he had something he wanted to say but just couldn't find the right way to say it.

Then there was Antonio. Antonio looked so intrigued it was honestly a little cute. He had such a child-like wonder behind his eyes and it was clear that he too had questions but he had so many that he didn't know which to start with.

It was Lovino who broke the silence first. "...So... you're a fish?"

Lukas dramatically sighed and threw his head back as he did so. He knew the question was coming, but damn if it wasn't annoying. "Yes. By all technical terms: I am a fish! Can we please focus back around to the fact that Emil has been kidnapped? Please?" Lukas practically begged.

"All those times you told the customers you were a merman pretending to be human... you were serious... absolutely... serious... do you know how many people you told?"

"And how many of those people actually believed me, Lovino?" Lukas countered quickly. "Regardless, I feel like I should mention, again, *Emil has been kidnapped*. And not just by anybody, I might add."

"...What are you going to do?" Antonio asked in a soft voice. "I mean... you *can't* call the cops. Like... legit *can't*. You'd be laughed at."

"Or arrested for 'pranking' them," Lovino spoke up next.

"I wish I knew where Andersen was!" Lukas got up from his seat and walked over towards the nearest window. He looked out of the blinds like he was expecting Andersen's car to show up at any minute. "...He knows and he can help... but if that *was* Marius that came in earlier and not Andersen... I'm scared."

"How do you know Andersen isn't working for this fishy-bastard?" Lovino asked in a soft tone.

"Please! Andersen didn't even know of Marius's existence until two weeks ago. I made sure to keep my past sealed tight! And the only reason I'm telling him is the same reason I'm telling you guys. He saw my magic first-hand."

"Hm." Lovino grunted. "What was with your magic earlier. It was like you were seeing something that we couldn't." Lovino leaned back into his seat. Lukas frowned and looked over at them. "You mentioned you saw red all over the room. You never explained that."

"... I think... I recreated 'the vision'." Lukas hummed out and shut his eyes. "I never thought it was possible."

"What is this 'vision'?"

"... Short version? I can see trails of magic. Something not visible by the naked eye. Arthur possesses it naturally. In fact, that's how he learned I had magic to start with. I think, in my shock, my magic reacted accordingly. I just wanted to see where Emil might have gone."

"And the red?"

Lukas clenched his fists and teeth at the same time. "Marius. His magic is red. It was *everywhere* in that room."

"What about the hair?" Antonio suddenly questioned. "You seemed to focus on it. It was like you were... zooming in on it?"

Lovino rolled his eyes before speaking: "Honing in on it, I think you mean, dumbass, but he's right..."

"Oh, this hair-" Like some cheap magic trick, Lukas seemed to have pulled the hair out of thin air to show them. It was just a short blonde strand of hair. "It stood out greatly to me. What do you see?"

Lovino shrugged "A blonde hair? Probably yours or Emil's?"

"No. It's Andersen's hair- at least that's what it *looks* like. And this little hair is telling me that it was Marius earlier not Andersen. What you see is blonde hair, but what I saw is a strand of brown hair covered in red magic. Marius's hair is this exact shade of brown! So, I speculate that Marius is using his magic to look like people so he'd go by unnoticed." Lukas explained as he held the hair in the palm of his hand.

"That's insane!" Lovino gasped.

"But it's true. The first thing I told 'Andersen' was that he looked weird because he did. He looked uncanny like he didn't belong..."

"Okay, so from what we know is that this creep took Emil, has the ability to shapeshift-"

"No." Lukas blinked suddenly once he realized it. "Not exactly shapeshifting- *Camouflage*. That's what he's using to blend in. We have the abilities to blend in with our surroundings, but he's using his to an extreme measure..."

"Okay, well regardless; He can blend in and take faces at will. What's his grand plan? Why take Emil?"

"Revenge?" Antonio inquired.

"... hm..." Lukas hummed as he twirled the hair between his fingers in thought. "I think revenge is only part of his reasoning. I've known Marius for a very long time... he wouldn't take Emil unless he had a reason to do so."

Lovino sighed and suddenly kicked his feet up on the table. "Sounds like an ambush." He slyly commented.

"He's not wrong. He wants *you* most likely." Antonio nodded along with Lovino. "He's using Emil as leverage."

"No, it can't be that. Marius would have left a clue, a note, *something*." Lukas started to pace around as his mind reeled. "He took Emil for a reason, but what for? What *is* he planning? I know he's been planning something, Arthur gave me a bit of a heads up earlier this month that Marius is up to something." Before Lukas knew it he was rambling to himself as he continued to pace about.

"... Random question?" Lovino, rather hesitantly, spoke up. It made Lukas stop and look at him, as well as Antonio. Lovino quietly interlocked his fingers as he thought about his question. "Marius... I... That was the name of the guy that found Feliciano when he tried that running away stunt."

"That's not a question-"

"-I'm not done. You see, Gilbert spoke to me after the incident. Apparently, Ludwig got some bad vibes off of the guy and said that Marius took a weird interest in Feliciano." Lovino's mouth twisted like he tasted something unpleasant.

"Hm... What could Feli have that Marius wants? Why does he want *children*? It's just not making any sense to me." Lukas shook his head.

"I'm still not done... The children were found on the beach, near the water. Okay; well, A year prior Feliciano almost drowned in the ocean. I don't know what happened. I just looked away for a second and-"

"-And he was gone..." Lukas finished in a soft voice as his hands started to slightly shake. His mind instantly went to Tino and Berwald. "It was like he was just... grabbed, right?"

"Exactly. When he came up he was yelling about a nice man saving him... He said the nice-man had a fishtail... I just figured Feliciano was seeing things, that a wave caught him..."

"..." Lukas's heart started to race with fear. How long has Marius been targeting children, why? His mind went back to Tino crying his heart out at Sven's funeral.

"He was grabbed! He had to be! You have to believe me, Andersen! He was grabbed! There's no way he just up and drowned!"

"That's not all. You said Marius has red eyes and fangs? Well... I can tell you that Marius is *not* the 'nice-man.' I saw a drawing Feli made... Brown hair, green eyes, and green tail? The hair is kinda crazy looking and he looked muscular?"

"Liam," Lukas spoke swiftly as he stared at Lovino and Antonio. "That was Liam, no doubt. Liam is Arthur's son and I can absolutely believe that Liam saved Feliciano from drowning." Lovino exhaled a sigh of relief.

"That does make me feel a little better."

"Still... Marius might have gotten his way in the end. Tino and Berwald's boy drowned last year... I-... I just don't understand if this is Marius's doing... unless?" It was almost like a light bulb went off over Lukas's head. "Petru?"

"Pet-who?" Antonio innocently asked and looked at Lovino for a moment.

"Petru! Marius's adopted child. Arthur laid a curse on Petru because Marius killed Francis-"

"Francis Bonnefoy?" Antonio instantly perked up.

Lukas nodded. "That's the guy."

Antonio shook his head slightly. "No. I saw the picture. Arthur was the one to kill Francis!"

"No, he wasn't! Arthur was trying to heal Francis but Gilbert came in at the wrong time. Arthur, in retaliation, cursed Petru-"

"You're wrong." Antonio's usually lax nature dropped in an instant. "Arthur was the one to stab Francis!" He jabbed his finger into the table as if to prove his point. "We have proof! Unless you've seen it with your own eyes, I just can't believe you."

Lukas sighed and shut his eyes. "I wasn't there that night. I was in the water." Lukas told Antonio. "But... I can tell you that Arthur was willing to be human for Francis's sake. So, why kill him?"

"I-..." Antonio snapped his mouth shut quickly before looking away. He then brought his thumb up and started to chew on it anxiously.

"... So, he cursed a child? What does this have to do with Marius going after Feliciano and Emil?" Lovino got the subject back on track. It was for the best at the moment.

"I honestly thought all these years later that Petru was dead, but I think I might be collecting the pieces, not perfectly but a picture is starting to show itself. I think these children have something that Marius needs to keep Petru alive. So, that might be his motive. After all, Petru would be the same age as Feli or Emil even."

"Jesus Christ, just when I was feeling okay about this field trip..." Lovino shook his head slowly as he stared down at the ground.

"Field trip? The one to the Philharmonic?" Lukas felt his eyebrows knit together in confusion. "Why would that worry you?"

"Emil never told you? The field trip was changed last minute! The kids are on a fishing rig-"

Lukas slowly shook his head as Lovino spoke those words. It felt like a bucket of ice-cold water was poured all over him.

It was like he was reliving it all over again.

"-There's something I'd like to show the two of you-"

"Lukas?" Lovino tried to bring Lukas back to reality, but it was too late.

"There's something I'd like to show the two of you." Marius hummed softly as Arthur and Lukas both swam up to him. He looked absolutely excited as he grinned at Lukas and Arthur alike.

"Oh? A new magic trick?" Arthur rather purred as he lazily laid on a flattened rock. Arthur then rested his hands under his head and stared up at Marius. "It wouldn't be the one you've been working moons on, would it?"

"It would be the one and only." Marius proudly boasted as he winked at Arthur. Arthur simply snorted in response.

Lukas wasn't exactly impressed as he just looked at his nails. Still, Marius had been working hard on this new trick of his. "So, what is it this time? A new shield?"

"No! But you're on the right track. I think I found a way for the humans to leave us alone."

Lukas frowned and crossed his arms now. "But they aren't hurting us-"

"Aren't they, though?" Marius countered rather bluntly. "They take our food and pollute our waters! They're a menace."

"I do agree with you on the pollution, but the humans need to eat as well, Marius." Lukas huffed in response. This made Marius frown in disagreement.

"Well, regardless, I don't like the humans in our waters. They just think they can do whatever they want- and don't forget Lukas, these humans you love so much will turn on you in an instant. Right, Arthur?"

Arthur hummed in his own thoughts. "I have no comment."

'Typical' Lukas thought with an eye-roll. "Whatever, just show us what you want to show us." Lukas decided to just say.

Marius let out a chuckle. "Follow me then-"

With a single flap of his tail, Marius was gone. Lukas and Arthur quickly followed behind him.

While they were swimming Lukas could only wonder just what it was that had Marius's so excited to 'be rid of humans.' it made Lukas worry in all honesty. He always felt a connection with the humans that liked to swim on the beach. Sometimes, if they were far enough away, Lukas would even strike up a conversation if he was brave enough that is. The humans were rather nice, yeah; some might be curt or blunt with Lukas, but then again he was a stranger in the water to them.

Lukas cast a look in Arthur's direction. Arthur seemed indifferent about this whole ordeal. Then again, ever since he adopted Lillie and Liam he seemed indifferent about a lot of things. Arthur almost seemed to have closed himself off from the two of them, yeah they'd hang around and talk, but Arthur...

Arthur wasn't as bubbly or loud as he used to be and Lukas didn't know what to make of it.

Suddenly a shadow fell upon them and Lukas stopped and looked up. It was a fishing boat, one he was used to seeing around these parts. It was called the... the...uh... Lukas frowned. He still wasn't exactly good at this whole 'reading' thing. Still, he recognized the ship and the people aboard it.

"Oh, right on time," Marius spoke out loud as he too looked up at the ship. Arthur pursed his lips and looked up as well.

Lukas frowned a bit more but decided to just let Marius show them his trick instead of arguing.

Marius swam under the ship, engulfed by the shadow of the boat. Lukas and Arthur stuck close to him, both occasionally looking up at the ship. He could see the surface above them ripple with the ship's movement. Lukas felt a sense of dread start to pool in the bottom of his stomach as he looked back at Marius.

What did he have planned?

Still, they swam with the boat. Out to sea the boat went and they went with it. Arthur let out a soft sigh of irritation the farther out they went, but eventually the boat came to a stop out into the middle of the ocean. Lukas heard the sound of grinding before he quickly swam out of the way before the anchor crushed him.

The anchor slammed down so hard that it caused sand and silt to explode around them from the impact. "Are you okay?" Arthur quickly swam to Lukas's side.

"I'm fine." Lukas was calm about it as the sand and dust started to settle around them.

Lukas tilted his head as he watched Marius. Marius simply crossed his arms and looked up at the fishing boat. He just looked bored. Then Marius suddenly started to swim up. Arthur and Lukas looked at each other before following Marius up to the surface. Marius broke through the surface but kept his head low.

Lukas came up next and he could hear the humans talking almost instantly. At first, he didn't know why Marius was actually creeping up closer to the boat until there was a loud whirring sound. Lukas watched as a metal arm slowly moved out from the boat and over the ocean. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together. Soon Lukas and Arthur joined Marius in hugging the side of the ship as the humans cast out their large net.

The net casted and disappeared in the water; hundreds, if not thousands, of fish, will be caught in that net and carted to their deaths.

The humans barked out orders to one another and that made Lukas look up rather curiously. He knew he shouldn't, but he was just too curious. So, he swam until he saw a small enough opening for him to peek through the bars. He could see the machines and the humans walking about doing their daily jobs.

"Why are you so infatuated with them?" Marius's voice suddenly asked as he swam up and watched with Lukas. "They're parasites. They take our food and our waters. They throw their garbage out in the ocean-"

"-They're not all that bad." Lukas cut Marius off. "You can't group all humans together when there are only a few that are bad," Lukas argued. "Besides, look at them." Lukas urged as he pointed to two boys chasing each other around on the ship. "They're adorable." He couldn't help but slightly coo.

"Hmph, they're not that cute." Arthur joined in as he sandwiched Lukas between Marius and himself.

"Yeah, they look a little like you, Arthur. Not cute at all!" Marius teased. Arthur, without an ounce of hesitation or regret, splashed Marius. As Marius was across from Lukas, Lukas got hit as well.

"Joseph and Jackson! You two get over here!" A booming voice called out causing all three of them to instinctively duck down into the water. "Walk! Don't run!" The voice instructed.

"C'mon." With that Marius dived under the water. Arthur and Lukas looked at each other and shrugged; they dived under the water to join Marius. Marius was now rubbing his palms together anxiously. "I should just stop stalling and show you guys." He whispered.

"Very well. Let's just get this over with." Arthur encouraged.

"Stand back."

Both did as instructed and went back a bit to allow Marius the room he wished for. Marius's hands started to glow that familiar shade of red and Lukas's anxiety suddenly started to spike again. He had a bad feeling about this.

Marius had his back to them but they both could watch as the magic around him crackled wildly. Both of them felt the almost electric feeling of the magic move around them. This wasn't just some simple magic trick. The ocean almost seemed to turn darker just moments

before he launched his attack. Using his magic he twisted it so it grasped onto the back of the ship.

"...Marius..." Lukas's voice was smaller than it's ever been. It was almost a squeak. He could only watch as Marius seemed to wrap his magic around his hand and hold it almost like a rope. Marius's hands were shaking as he was trying to keep his control on the magic.

The whole ocean seemed to go absolutely still as Marius started to lift the boat off of the water.

"-Put it down." Arthur suddenly spoke up, his voice just as small and frightened as Lukas's, but that was only for just a moment before Arthur shook his head. "Put it down!" He barked this time around.

Marius stopped for just a moment and turned to look at them. "Why?" He inquired. It was just a simple word that held so much weight to it at that moment. "I told you, this will stop them!" Marius snarled at the two of them. The boat started to rise higher.

"Marius, there are children on that boat!" Lukas snarled right back. "This isn't right! These humans did nothing to us!"

"Lukas is right! I understand you hate them, I hate humans just as well, but you're going about this all wrong!" Arthur yelled back. His fists were clenched and his own eyes were starting to glow. Never a good sign. "Put the boat down!"

All while they were talking higher and higher the boat rose. It wasn't at a dangerous level yet, but it was getting there. Even though they were underwater Lukas could hear the sound of the panic above them followed by the engine starting to rev.

Marius frowned and turned to look at his magic. He then narrowed his eyes and looked right back at them. It was just pure defiance in his eyes... or was it hatred? Lukas never knew. Still, whatever it was just drove Marius to do what he did next; he continued to make the ship rise higher and higher. As the ship rose, the people started to jump, or fall and seeing this, Lukas decided to work on saving them, he wasn't going to let Marius win-

Lukas couldn't get close enough as before he knew his arms were bound to his side by not red, but green magic. "Arthur!" Lukas hissed as he was forced to stay in place. He wiggled and thrashed as he fought against the magic. "What are you doing!? Unbind me!"

"I'm protecting you..." Arthur looked at Lukas, his eyes glowing green as his hands also glowed. There was a desperation in his eyes as he gazed at Lukas.

"I don't want your protection!"

"Marius, he-" Arthur yelled but never got to finish.

Lukas could see it. More humans fell, some tried to swim to safety, but it did little when the machines started to fall. When the machines fell and bits of the boat; Lukas couldn't see

anything as it caused the sand to rise all around them. The waters rippled violently and animals fled for their lives.

Then for one whole moment, Lukas could see as he fearfully was forced to watch as the boat fell into the ocean in a nosedive. The whole area shook as a mighty wave actually knocked Arthur and Lukas back. Lukas, being bound, was, unfortunately, unable to protect himself and crashed into a nearby boulder.

This knocked him out.

Lukas knew he couldn't have been out for too long, but when he came too he was unbound, thankfully, and the sand was starting to clear down... but the water was bloody- oh, so bloody.

There was a pain in Lukas's head that only intensified as he tried his best to swim up. Lukas didn't only see the blood that tainted the water, but he could actually taste it as it went through his gills.

He saw a bright red light; Lukas watched in horror as Arthur was struck by Marius.

The next thing Lukas knew he was striking Marius, not with his magic, in fact his magic was the last thing on his mind, no, he was just his fists. "It's not enough you attack these humans! But what did Arthur do?!" Lukas's strikes were starting to weaken as his emotions were taking over. "What did these humans do?! You absolute jerk..." Lukas covered his mouth with one hand while he kept the other hand clamped tightly on Marius's shoulder. Marius didn't say a word as he just stared at Lukas with contempt in his eyes.

"Dad!-"

Lukas looked up to see Liam and Lillie coming their way. Arthur, who had gotten up at some point, turned his head towards his children.

That was when something from the ship exploded. What? Lukas didn't know what, but something blew up for a second time. If it weren't for Marius there wasn't a doubt in Lukas's mind, Lukas might have died. Marius was fast, faster than Lukas at that moment and shielded both of them, using his own body to shield Lukas just in case his magic failed. Lukas, though angry, was forced to stay and hug Marius. Marius held him tight, tighter than tight. So tight that Lukas almost couldn't breathe.

Even though Marius caused this mess, Lukas was incredibly grateful for Marius at this moment.

Lukas didn't know it, but Arthur with his own quick reflexes had shielded his children just as well. Lukas only figured it out when the danger passed and Marius let him go. Arthur was breathing heavily, his shield still up as he held both Liam and Lillie tightly against his body.

The moment everything finally seemed to calm down Liam was the first to break away. "Uncle Lukas! Uncle Marius! are you alright!?" Liam swam and hugged them both tightly, it didn't take long for Lillie to follow suit.

"Lukas?" Liam sniffled weakly.

"Lukas!"

"Huh?"

"Lukas!?" Lukas felt a light slap to the face as Lovino suddenly grabbed both sides of his face. "Stop doing whatever it is you're doing! You know something, don't you!?" Lovino demanded as he forced Lukas to look at him.

"He's going to sink the boat." Those words came out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Marius- I-I've seen it before." Lukas desperately grabbed onto Lovino's wrists with both of his hands. Lukas then squeezed Lovino's wrists tightly. Lovino looked beyond shocked. "We have to stop them from sailing!"

"Leave it to me!" Antonio suddenly called out as he grabbed his phone. "I'll tell them some B.S... that'll stop 'em from even getting on the boat!"

"I'll get to calling the cops!" Lovino jerked his hands out of Lukas's grip.

Lukas felt on the verge of a panic attack.

That was when the front door seemed to *burst* open. "Lukas!?"

"Andersen!" A small wave of relief washed over Lukas. Lukas ran and quickly rushed to the front door, only to stop just a foot or two away from Andersen.

Andersen looked absolutely disheveled. His hair was even wilder than what it usually was, he had dark circles under his eyes, and looked like he hadn't slept. Still, that didn't stop Lukas from just making *sure* this was Andersen in front of him.

Using his new found vision Lukas saw that there was red all around Andersen, but the red wasn't surrounding him like it was the hair and he could see that this was Andersen, not Marius.

"Thank god!" Lukas cried before rushing to hug Andersen.

Their hug was brief before Lukas separated. "Marius has Emil! Not only that but Marius he's planning to harm Tino and the school kids-"

"-Slow down. What do you mean?" Andersen grabbed onto Lukas's shoulders with both of his hands. "Is he going to shoot up the school?"

"No! He changed the field trip! Tino and a bunch of kids are on a boat- Andersen, I think Tino was right, Sven was grabbed, grabbed by Marius! I don't know why, but Marius is murdering *children!*" Lukas unleashed everything at once. "You have to call *everybody* in that precinct of yours and alert them of this. This is absolutely serious!"

"What about Emil!?"

Lukas's fists once again started to shake as he stood there.

What about Emil?

"... you leave that to me!" Lukas decided firmly as he snatched his car keys off of the bowl by the front door.

"Lukas! You aren't even dressed!" Andersen tried to call him back. It was true, Lukas was still in his boxers and tank-top.

"It doesn't matter! Clothes don't matter where I'm going- ...you, Lovino, and Antonio work on stopping that boat by any means necessary!"

Concerned neighbors called the police because of the screaming going on at the normally peaceful Väinämöinen-Oxsternia household.

However; by the time the police officers got there, they were met with what had to be a robbery. The front door was kicked in and completely off its hinges; when they went up the stairs, they saw a messy hallway from the broken and fallen pictures that once hung on the wall, followed by dents in the plaster that only violence could cause.

And the owner of the house nowhere to be seen.

Well, it turns out that would only be part of what would be the most confusing case in their recent history. As only just thirty minutes later they would get another phone call. A more serious one.

"There's a class of children on a field trip on a fishing boat-" A Hispanic voice would start to tell them.

"-There's a bomb on the boat those kids are on! Dock it! Dock it, immediately!" An angry Italian voice would finish in a mad fury before hanging up. Any attempts to call the number back were in vain. Tracing the call was impossible telling them it was destroyed.

Obviously, a threat of this caliber was brought up to the chief of the police department instantly and things just became stranger. "What do you mean this field trip wasn't sanctioned!?" Ivan roared over the phone as he pounded his fist on his desk. "Dammit!" Ivan slammed his phone down on its receiver. He buried his face in his hands and groaned. Over twenty students and two teachers were in danger and he didn't even know where to start. Of all the days for this to happen-..." He trailed and frowned. "It almost seems purposeful." He muttered to himself.

Matthew took his brother and ran for the hills as far as Máximo and Ivan knew. Not just that but Eduard was still missing along with Andersen and Toyls and now *this*?

It just seemed like too much for it all to be a coincidence.

Ivan frowned and tapped his desk rhythmically with his fingers. The field trip wasn't sanctioned, the principal was missing, and what's even worse? The fishing boat that took off

wasn't even scheduled to do so, but it's gone and no amount of calling reached the captain of the boat. This was *bad*.

It was brief-every-officer-about-the-current-problem bad.

Ivan honestly couldn't waste any more time than he had. So, he got out of his seat and quickly went out of his office. He had to follow the rules on what to do with this and decided to treat it as what it was, a kidnapping.

The moment he stepped out all eyes were instantly on him as there was a hush over the area. It was a small town and news travels like lightning. He could see some officers trying to look hopeful, that the boat was found and the kids were on their way home as they speak.

"The boat... has yet to be found!" he spoke firmly. "As of right now I want AMBER alerts on every missing child that boarded that boat. Not just that, I want a missing persons report on the teachers as well. This is a kidnapping clear as day."

"But what if it's a hostage situation?" Someone asked amongst the crowd.

"If it were that then the terrorist would have called us by now. This is a kidnapping until stated otherwise. Understood?"

"But what about the bomb?" Máximo inquired. "That's a clear threat."

"Yes, it is. I will not deny that. That's why I have no choice but to call the coast guard at this point. I have to hand the case to them and hope they find the children in time. Right now, there are over twenty little lives on the boat and three adult lives."

There was a silence as a couple of people actually hung their heads at the news.

"Máximo, a word?" Ivan asked.

"Of course."

They both got back to Ivan's office. Ivan held the door open for Máximo and silently shut it once Máximo was inside. "You have to know this is too much of a coincidence, right?"

Máximo's lips twitched before he growled. "I don't think Mattie would..." he trailed off.

"I know. I'm with you on this. I don't think it's Matthew, but right now with all, that's happening he is a suspect. He took his brother out of our custody and fled, then the next day this happens?"

"... I... I just... it doesn't make any sense." Máximo shook his head as he tried to wrap his head around it all.

"I don't think he's the terrorist. However: I do think Matthew is most definitely involved in this somehow. I don't know if he's trying to stop it or is part of it." Ivan explained as he sat down at his desk.

Máximo frowned as he tried to wrack his brain for any possible explanation for Matthew's behavior but none came to mind. No good ones anyway.

"I'm kicking myself in the ass for turning off the interrogation camera. It wasn't a real interrogation and I felt no need for it to be on, now I wish I had it on. It might have helped us figure out where exactly they went to." Ivan grumbled at his own stupidity. Máximo could see the disappointment in Ivan's eyes. "Regardless; Matthew and Liam are suspects as well as Andersen and Tolys. I called you in here because I wanted to warn you. I have no choice but now call an ATL on Matthew and Liam and label them as persons of interests in this case."

Máximo frowned but in the end could only sigh in defeat. "I understand."

"If you see Matthew or Liam I want them immediately arrested and taken in for questioning. I understand you are close to Matthew, but lives are on the line here."

"Understood."

"Great. Now, I want you to take Emma and go to the docks for the time being. I'm scheduling some more people with you as well. The parents will no doubt be storming the docks once this news hits. We need control when that happens."

"Riot gear?"

"Not yet. We'll see how crazy these parents get. For now just take Emma and go. I'll be down shortly." Ivan reached over and grabbed his phone. He simply took it off of the receiver but didn't dial just yet. "And one final thing, Máximo?"

"Yes, sir?"

"These are strange times. Be careful."

Máximo nodded and finally left his office.

Once alone Ivan started to dial for the coast guard. These were strange times indeed.

This was some sort of torture. Emil was sure of it. The suspense of waiting for Marius to show up was absolutely killing him with every minute that he was stuck in this cave with only Petru to keep him company. Not that Petru was keeping a conversation with Emil or anything. In fact the last time Petru had spoken to Emil was when 'Sven' had poked out and that was hours ago.

Emil tried to pass the time by drawing in the sand, a lot of fun *that* was; the water would just brush his drawings away seconds later. God, what did Mer-people even do for fun?

So, here Emil sat huddled in the farthest darkest corner he could find. His tail tucked up against his chest as he just sat there somehow both bored out of his skull and frightful for what's to come.

Emil quietly picked up a shell from the ground and inspected it. It used to be a hermit crab home, but now it was just an empty pink shell.

This was the first time Emil wished he had magic like Lukas. Emil knew that Lukas could have found a way to call for help. Emil couldn't do any of that. He felt helpless and weak just sitting there.

"You might be magical." Lukas had told him one day. *"Almost all mer-people have a bit of magic in them. Some more than others. If we were still in the ocean there's no doubt I'd train you, but you have to understand. On the land not only is magic not needed, but humans won't look too kindly on it."*

That was basically their first conversation on magic. Emil never blamed Lukas for his reluctance on the subject, he understood Lukas's motives as Lukas always made them clear to Emil.

Silently Emil held the shell between his two index fingers, he could feel the pointy ends of the shell dig into his fingers as a result.

'Even if I do have magic, what can I do? I can't even make a simple shield or heal myself!' Emil thought to himself. *'Lukas can do all sorts of things. I've seen him attack, defend, and even call for help using just a shell or stone.'*

Emil dropped the shell for just a second before snatching it mid-fall. He still remembered how Lukas did it. He would bring the object to his mouth, shut his eyes, blow on it, and poof! The object would glow, he'd toss it and it'll not just call for help but deliver a message if needed. Emil remembered how cool of a trick it was.

Lukas told him it was actually a simple trick. You just speak your message and imagine the person you'd call in your mind. You'd just have to hone a bit of magic on the rock before tossing it. That's what gave it its glow.

Emil pursed his lips and looked at the shell in his hand. He then looked at the barrier before him. The barrier was just to stop people from entering and exiting, but when Emil tossed another shell at it, the shell went right through. It was just to stop living matter it seemed.

Emil opened his palm and looked at the pink shell in his palm. *'This is silly, I'm not seriously considering this, am I?'* Emil thought to himself. *'It's better than just sitting around waiting for certain death, right?!'* The other part of Emil's brain argued. *'But who would I even call? Lukas? What if he's not in the water? Uncle Arthur?'* Now, this thought made Emil frown.

He remembered his uncle Arthur as much as he remembered Uncle Marius. But Lukas wasn't friends with Uncle Arthur anymore, what if it didn't work? Would Arthur just laugh and leave him for dead? Would Arthur even respond if he sent out an SOS message?

Petru let out a sudden shockingly loud breath in causing Emil to turn and look at him with wide eyes. Petru's whole body seemed to be seizing up. Petru was sick and needed help, this much Emil knew on his own.

Emil looked down at the shell and sucked in a slow breath. "I don't know if this will work... but I have to do something." He decided.

With a bit of determination, Emil brought the shell to his mouth. He paused before blowing on it as Lukas would. Instead, he tightened his fist around the shell so tightly that the shell started to pinch his skin. His fist shook as he continued to clench it with all his might. *'Please... please. Just let me have enough magic to call for help!'* he begged to any available god to hear his plea.

He knew just enough about magic to know it takes energy and you have to concentrate. *'The first thing you do with magic will be your hardest. After that, it'll get easier.'* Lukas once told Emil.

Emil shut his eyes and concentrated long and hard on the shell. He thought about his uncle Arthur, what he could remember of him, that was. Big blonde eyebrows, sand-colored hair, green eyes...

He focused all of his power on the tiny shell in his hand. He didn't feel any different and that scared him. He tried hard not to be skeptical, if he had that mindset then it'll never work. So, he pushed any skepticism to the back of his mind. *'Please...'* Emil squeezed his eyes tight, brought his fist up to his mouth, and shakily opened his hand. "Uncle Arthur... I need you." Emil whispered. This had to work. It *had* to.

He kept his eyes shut tightly as he kept his mind purely on getting out of here. On being freed and Petru maybe getting the help he needed.

Emil slowly peeked one eye open before opening the other eye in amazement.

The shell was glowing, it was glowing a lilac glow, no doubt mimicking Emil's own eye color. Emil felt a wave of excitement suddenly roam through his entire body.

With this excitement, he threw the shell like he was throwing a baseball. It passed through the barrier with ease. The shell daintily started to float to the ground and Emil's excitement started to turn to horror when he saw the light start to fade from the shell. "No, hang on, please!" Emil pleaded, Lukas never told him that this could happen!

Emil felt all his hope start to fade as by the time the shell touched the ground all light had died out. Emil sank to the ground and frowned. "That's fine... I'll just try again, I know I'm magical... I just have to... I don't know what I have to do..."

All Emil wished, for now, was for proper training from Lukas-

Emil gasped when the shell suddenly let out a burst of purple light. The burst was big and wide and with the burst, Emil heard a voice, his own voice. His voice echoed from the shell and filled the silent area with such a volume that was practically impossible for anybody to ignore!

Still, Emil hoped that Uncle Arthur was within earshot... the ocean was vast after all.

Laying there on the ground it was then did Emil realize that he was having an awfully hard time keeping his eyes open and all of his energy was all but sapped out of him.

A quick nap wouldn't hurt anything, would it?

Arthur felt two waves of magic. One was familiar and drew him in, but the other was foreign which also called for his attention.

Arthur wanted to ignore both. He had something more important to be doing. With Marius out and about Arthur was taking this time to actually try and find where Marius had nested. Arthur knew Marius had something huge planned, and he knew that with these up and coming days Marius would be out of the water less and less in search of a cure.

Arthur wanted to know where Marius had hidden Petru.

Arthur, as much as he hated to admit it, knew Lukas was right in the end. He did punish Petru for what Marius had done. Arthur will never *ever* forgive Marius for killing Francis. They can never go back to being friends, but he still needed to do the right thing. He needed to save Petru from the curse he placed on him. Petru was caught in the crossfire and innocent in this whole ordeal.

Marius took Petru and hid, Arthur knew that Marius had to be nearby. Marius always did like the saying of keeping your enemies close. Plus it would only make sense for him to be close by. But Marius was crafty, and Arthur has spent literal years searching for Marius's new nesting place.

Then Lillie had heard the message. Lillie completely rushed at Arthur at such a speed he didn't think possible. She nearly knocked him to the ground. Arthur would have thought she had gone crazy until: "But the voice called you *uncle* Arthur!"

Arthur had to follow Lillie to where she heard the message. "Are you sure it called me *uncle*?"

"Absolutely! Without a doubt!" Lillie nodded as the two of them swam.

"Could it have been Petru?" Arthur wondered out loud. He remembered those days Marius had allowed him near Petru. Petru had magic in him; maybe he was finally calling for help? This could help change everything! Maybe...

Maybe Arthur could finally fix things.

"I don't think so." Lillie turned so fast and abruptly that her long black hair actually hit him right in the face. "Sorry-" She collected her hair quickly. Arthur stuck his tongue out as a strand had somehow found its way in there.

"I should show you how to use hair ties." Arthur off-handedly commented.

"Well, regardless; It sounded like it came from down there, daddy," Lillie told Arthur as she casually pointed down. Arthur frowned and crossed his arms.

This was a geyser.

"Sweetheart-"

"I know! But I'm telling you; it came from down here!"

Arthur hummed in irritation. If it were Alfred or Peter telling him this information he wouldn't even think of doing something so foolish, but this was Lillie, and Lillie wouldn't lie to him about something like this. So, against all logic and instinct, Arthur poked his head *into the geyser*. He felt his hair move as he went upside down.

"I don't see anything, Love," Arthur commented. It was the truth, all he could see was the tube that was connected to the geyser. "Maybe it didn't come from down there?" He poked his head back up. "It couldn't have."

Lillie didn't seem so sure as she wiggled in place for just a moment. "Maybe use your vision before we leave? Please? I know I'm not crazy! I just *know* it came from down there." Lillie seemed to beg.

Arthur sighed. '*Just to make her happy.*' he decided.

Unlike the others who had replicated his vision with magic, he didn't need magic to use his vision as his was natural. He just learned how to keep it at bay at times as it could be annoying. So, with a simple blink of his eyes, Arthur tapped into his vision. He then poked his head back down into the geyser.

As expected, at first glance he saw nothing and was ready to tell Lillie as such, but then he got another look, a harder look.

It was faint, but he actually *could* see something with his vision. The tunnel was long and winding down, but it wasn't endless. In fact, he could see the end as it curved out just a good ten or so feet down. At the end of the tunnel, he could make out something that seemed to be glowing.

Glowing *red*.

"Okay-" Arthur poked his head back up as he gripped both sides of the geyser. "You might be right." He softly told Lillie. "I'm going down."

"I'm coming with you."

"No. This could be dangerous."

Lillie frowned at him. "But-"

"No buts, stay here." He ordered firmly and with that, he poked his head back into the geyser. He heard Lillie let out an indignant 'hmpf!' but chose to ignore it.

Arthur wiggled his shoulders through the geyser before he forced his whole body in. The tunnels were tight, not uncomfortably so, but if he had claustrophobia it'd be a different story.

The tunnels allowed him just enough room to wiggle his way down.

The closer he got to the exit the more he could see the glowing red light. So, much like a snake or eel would, Arthur just kept himself wiggling through every twist and turn. That was until it ended so abruptly that he fell through the exit. Thankfully, he managed to stop himself from eating sand.

It was so dark down here, dark and cold. If it weren't for the red barrier Arthur probably wouldn't be able to see at all.

Arthur only stayed there, floating and staring at the barrier and cave in complete and total awe. He just couldn't believe it.

Marius was living below them this whole time.

Arthur shook himself out of his shock and quietly approached the entrance of the cave. He looked into the cave, passed the dimly lit barrier and his eyes went wide.

"Emil?" Arthur gasped.

Emil was indeed laying face down at the entrance of the cave. He looked to be in a deep sleep, one Arthur knew all too well. Emil had undoubtedly used magic to call for *him* of all people.

Arthur frowned and got even closer to the barrier. He could feel its magic radiating, and as expected, when he touched it not only was it warm, but it stopped him from going into the cave entirely.

So, Arthur backed off a bit. He decided to test the durability of the barrier. Arthur was swift in his attack, he shot a blast of magic directly at the barrier. The barrier didn't even crack and Arthur's magic fizzled out upon touching it.

He looked at Emil laying there and his mouth turned down into a frown. *'Okay, new plan.'* Arthur tapped his head hoping it'll help him think of something new. The only thing he could think to do was try rapidly attacking the barrier. Single attacks didn't work, so maybe fast rapid ones would.

Arthur backed up a bit. He readied his body and brought his magic out. He then focused on quick rapid attacks, almost like he was holding a whip, he slashed at the barrier in every which way. Up, down, left, right, fast and swift.

This did have some sort of effect as the barrier actually cracked. It was just a simple small crack, but as quick as it appeared it healed itself just as quickly. The barrier wasn't invincible then, but it required a lot of magic to destroy.

Arthur paused and allowed his magic to die off as he studied this barrier. Marius was paranoid, and he had every right to be. His paranoia was no doubt paying off. Still, Arthur was stubborn, almost to a fault. He needed to get this barrier down and save Emil. No doubt

whatever Marius had planned for Emil had to do with Petru and all the other children he's been kidnapping.

This year was going to be different because Arthur was going to heal Petru, whether Marius wanted him to or not. No more children, human or otherwise, would be losing their lives to Marius.

It all made Arthur start to shake in rage. *'This has gone too far.'* Arthur decided then and there.

Arthur just needed more power to break this barrier down. More power than he could produce on his own. Lillie had some magic, but not enough. He needed someone with equal power as him. Together they could knock this barrier down in such a way that it wouldn't have the time to heal itself.

Arthur needed Lukas.

He needed a way to call for Lukas's aid, a quick way, but Lukas was on the land-

'Is he?' Arthur suddenly thought and brought his hand to his mouth. He felt two waves of magic before coming here. If Emil was here in the water, then Arthur felt absolutely safe in guessing that the first wave of magic he felt had to have been Lukas in some way or another. Yes, Lukas said he wouldn't return to the water, but with Emil taken by Marius, it wasn't a crazy assumption on Arthur's part.

Arthur knew what he needed to do. He was swift and swam up the rocky tunnel with such speed that he almost made himself dizzy. "What was it, Dad?" Lillie immediately asked when Arthur wiggled his way out of the fake geyser.

Arthur didn't answer her and felt a little bad about it, but he was on a mission and couldn't afford to waste time explaining. He used his tail to kick up some nearby sand and grabbed the first decently sized shell he found. Once in his hands, he bolted for the surface. "Daddy!" Lillie didn't take long following him.

He broke through the surface, he had to make this throw count. He was briefly splashed as Lillie appeared right next to him, he'll explain it all to her when he was finished.

Arthur stared at the shell in his hand. A sunray venus was what the humans would call it. He focused his magic on it and watched as it went from purple to green in a heartbeat. "... Lukas, I... I need you." Arthur sighed out his message. He wanted this shell to go far. So, he awkwardly looked at Lillie.

"Sweetheart, you have a better arm than me; care to do the honors?" He asked as he offered the shell to Lillie. Lillie, still a little confused, nodded and took the shell in her hands. Arthur watched her cock her arm before throwing the shell like one would a frisbee. Far it went, so far in fact that Arthur didn't even see the rings of light that would usually accompany it. He just saw the splash.

Arthur went back under and so did Lillie. The two of them returned to the geyser and from there Arthur explained everything to Lillie while also being on the lookout for both Lukas and Marius.

Lillie understood but looked concerned. "Is Emil going to be alright?"

"He's fine, I'm sure. This was, no doubt, his first attempt at magic. His body isn't used to the strain." Arthur explained as he started to swim about uneasily. "Lukas hasn't been training him. Not that I can blame him. If things would have ended differently with Francis... I would have given up my magic as well. Human's don't take well to magic. I'm afraid."

Arthur gritted his teeth as time started to drag on. *'What if it wasn't Lukas's magic you felt, but Marius's? He'll be coming this way to investigate and you'll be caught. Yes, you can handle Marius, but if he goes after Lillie? ...'* Arthur felt his paranoia start to eat away at his mind the longer he waited.

"Was it right for Lukas to take Emil with him to the surface?"

Lillie asked this question out of *nowhere* and it made Arthur stop his pacing to look at her in confusion. "Pardon?"

"Was Lukas in the right for taking Emil? I mean. Emil was young when he went with him. Emil didn't have a say so, but he's one of us. What if Emil wanted to stay?"

"... I see your question, Lillie, and raise you this: was I in the right for taking your brothers in?"

Lillie frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. "That's not fair, Dad, they were dying."

"Yes, they were, but it wasn't their choice to come here and be with us. I did what I thought to be right and I still stand by that. And in his eyes; Lukas thought the same. He just wanted what was best for Emil..."

"-That and when Emil becomes old enough I would have let him decide on what he wanted to do."

Arthur whipped his head around and stared at Lukas.

Lukas looked uncomfortable being back in the water. He kept his arms tightly crossed over his chest, his face looked a cross between pissed and uneasy, his lips were pursed into a tight line and a vein was popping out in his neck showing that he was tense and to top it off he wasn't even looking at them directly.

"I got your message. Make whatever you want to tell me quick because Emil is missing and I know Marius took him! I'm not here to stay, so soak this-" Lukas moved his arm up and down his body. "-in for as long as you can!"

"Well, you don't need to look for much longer. Emil is down there." Arthur pointed down the geyser. "And if you want to get him out you're going to need my help."

"..." Lukas looked at Arthur before biting his lip and backing up just a bit. "Why should I believe you?"

"Do you want Emil back safely, or not?"

"Of course I do."

"Then you're going to have to trust me! Lukas, I'm not lying to you. Honest to whatever god you may believe in!"

"Okay..." Lukas relaxed a little bit and then crossed his arms over his chest. "Let me rephrase that: What do you want in return? You can't expect me to believe that you want nothing out of this."

Arthur just sighed and shook his head.

"I don't want much, Lukas. I just need your help with healing Petru."

Chapter End Notes

WHOOOO! I can't believe I thought this story would be over by now. But it's not. Now we're starting to get to the FUN parts! It's about to get exciting y'all!

I wanted to say that I'm aware that Seychelles, canonically, has brown hair not black, however I'm a believer that she should be darker in hair and skin color than what was made for her. (At least they changed her appearance later on. I can be thankful for.)

a magical break-up

Chapter Notes

So, what happened? Why is this chapter a little later than most? To put it plainly I was having issues with it. I had written 16 pages! And... I hated them. They didn't flow right and felt awkward if not clunky. So, with a heavy heart I deleted all 16 pages and decided to try again. That's why this chapter is late. I just want to give you guys what I think to be my absolute best and won't settle for something that I find bad, because I learned from experience: If I hate it or don't like it then you, the readers, most likely won't either.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Marius knew Arthur was hiding something from him.

He knew it'd be more children, Arthur was as soft as they come, even though he'd never claim it. So, out of respect, Marius kept his distance. But Marius could only spend so long by himself.

Ever since he forced the boat under the water Lukas has been avoiding him. It was only a matter of time before he started swimming around Arthur's waters again. He had new tips and tricks to magic he wanted to show to his friend after all.

However; the moment he made it to Arthur's old nesting grounds he found it abandoned. This made him frown as he circled the area. 'Why would he just leave?- how many children did he find this time?' Marius thought. That was the only reason for Arthur to leave this area would be if he found even more children.

'-Or he wants to keep away from you... ha!' Marius laughed at the idea. He and Arthur were friends! And soon Lukas would come back around. But the question now stood: 'Where was Arthur?'

Well, Marius really didn't have to wait around long to find that answer.

"-Catch me if you can!" A familiar female voice suddenly spoke and Marius looked up to see Lillie for just half a second before she was gone again. So, Marius instantly started to swim that way.

He knew he was getting closer when he heard a series of voices. He recognized Lillie's voice amongst new ones. They all sounded like males. So, Marius swam until he saw them some distance away.

Two blonde-haired twin boys were currently swimming around trying to chase Lillie, who was much faster than they were. Marius simply stayed still watching them play from a distance. He couldn't quite place it, but these boys seemed oddly familiar to him.

The three of them laughed and giggled as Lillie swam literal circles around them.

The longer he stared the more he was sure he had seen these boys before.

Marius didn't get a chance to stare and watch much longer as suddenly sand was kicked up and it obscured his view. "Huh-"

That was when something barreled itself right into Marius's side.

Marius couldn't stop the hiss from leaving his mouth as he was slammed into the ground. In an instant, his would-be attacker was shot back as Marius used his magic to send them flying into a nearby patch of coral.

Marius saw a dark green tail before suddenly recognizing the wild brown hair.

Liam hissed in pain as blood oozed out of various places where the coral had cut him pretty harshly.

"Oh-" Marius instantly felt bad for Liam, had Marius known it was him he wouldn't have attacked the way he did. Marius went forward to help Liam, but suddenly his arms were bound to his side. 'Oh boy.' was all he could think once he recognized the bright green magic binding him in place.

"What- Marius?" Arthur spoke as he came from behind. Marius waited for the binds to be released but it never came. So, Marius could only turn his head in Arthur's direction.

That was when Marius got a shock as Arthur was holding a little toddler Mer-person in his arms. The toddler slept peacefully. Lillie had vanished taking her two new brothers with her. That alone made Marius suddenly suspicious.

"Marius, what are you doing here?" Arthur suddenly questioned making Marius look back over at him. Arthur shifted the sleeping toddler so they were resting against his chest and not on his arms. "Liam, are you okay?" Arthur suddenly shifted the conversation over to his oldest.

"Fine, pops! Just a bit of blood-" Liam grinned as inspected his arm. There was a long cut on his right arm, jagged that went from the top of his wrist and slanted down towards his elbow. It had to be the worst of his cuts. It looked deep, but Liam didn't seem to be phased.

"-Well, come here, the last thing we need are sharks." Arthur beckoned Liam over. Marius was rather impressed watching Arthur heal Liam with one hand while holding the sleeping child with the other one. Impressed indeed, until Marius realized that he was still bound in place.

"Uh,- Arthur? Not to sound rude, but if you could unbind me whenever you get a minute, that'd be great." Marius innocently requested.

"Huh? Oh." With a flick of his wrist, Arthur released the binds.

*Liam was soon healed and the moment he was better Arthur passed the toddler off to him.
"Take Peter home, please? I need to talk to Marius."*

" 'Course, pops." Liam nodded and held Peter close to his chest. Peter stirred a little but didn't wake. Marius got a look at Peter and instantly noticed how much Peter actually looked like Arthur. Like a lot. Enough so that Marius blinked in surprise. He was sure the two of them had the same eyebrows, but Liam turned away too quickly for Marius to confirm that.

"Did you find a mate?" Marius instantly asked now wanting the details of how a mate and children came to be so quickly.

Arthur rolled his eyes and tsked his tongue in irritation. "Are you going to ask that every time you see me with children?"

*"But that one looked so much like you." Marius pointed out and Arthur frowned suddenly.
"And so did the other little boys though I only saw them for a moment... also, five children!?
Arthur you madman!" Marius grinned before laughing. "And here I thought I'd be the one collecting children."*

Arthur blushed. "I'm not 'collecting' children, you dolt. These kids... they were just in a bad spot is all. So, I took them under my fin."

Marius hummed at this. "Well, I was going to ask if you wanted to see some of the tricks I've been working on-"

"-After the disaster that happened last time? No." Arthur borderline snapped at Marius.

"That was moons ago. Can't you two just get over it already? Besides, I thought you hated humans as much as I did?" Marius spoke calmly as he asked this.

Arthur's frown deepened. "Marius. That attack was unprovoked. I'm all for retribution if it's fair and just. Those fishers did nothing to us."

"They took our food." Marius challenged.

*"That doesn't mean we should murder them for it- No. No! I am not fighting you on this-"
Arthur threw his hands up.*

"At least you'll actually talk to me, Lukas won't even grant me that pleasure these days. I swear he moved nests at least three times."

"And you kept finding him?"

"He won't leave the area, just the caves or whatever he chooses to sleep in."

Arthur scrunched his nose up as he thought to himself for a moment before shaking his head in the end. "He's upset, Marius."

"... You know that does bring up a question that's been in the back of my mind since the incident. Why did you bind Lukas?"

*Arthur's face turned angry in a heartbeat. "You know why." It was such a simple sentence filled with so much venom and resentment that it made Marius's blood turn cold. "I was watching you the whole time Marius. I saw your magic, I saw **you** . If Lukas would have intervened you were going to attack him."*

"I would never!"

*"I was watching you with my vision, Marius!" Arthur suddenly yelled. "Your magic was going crazy! Also, I feel like I should add, you attacked **me**!"*

"Only because you attacked me first!"

The two of them now face to face, unaware that they were actually getting closer to one another. Both of them had their breaths held waiting for the other to make the next move. Arthur didn't deny it, because it was true. When the boat sank, Arthur sent Marius flying back into a rock so Marius attacked him back.

Arthur snorted and backed away. He looked down at the sandy ground and just sighed "Marius..." Arthur crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know if Lukas will ever forgive you for what you've done. That's something you have to talk to him about not me."

Marius was ready to just let the conversation drop and change to something else but that was when a little body suddenly swam past him at an impressive speed. A child launched themselves into Arthur's arms.

"-I'm sorry!" Lillie swam over and quickly grabbed the boy by his arms. "I tried to stop him..." She tried and failed, to whisper to Arthur. It was one of the twins, now that he was closer Marius was able to get a better look at him.

Just like the toddler, this boy could easily pass as Arthur's legitimate child. Marius actually tilted his head as the wheels started to turn. 'I've seen this boy before.' He thought as he stared down at the boy in question.

He had Sandy blonde hair and blue eyes. He looked at Marius and smiled at him. "Hello, I'm... uh..." The boy's cheery face fell and he looked confused for a moment before looking over at Arthur. He whispered something that sounded like "-I forgot again..."

"Alfred... Marius... this is... Alfred." Arthur suddenly grabbed Alfred by his shoulders and pulled him in closer towards his chest. Arthur's tone was slow and now on the edge of caution.

Marius leaned in to look at Alfred a little better. When he did Alfred frowned a little but put on a brave face. Marius narrowed his eyes. Then it hit him like a speeding boat why this kid looked so familiar to him. Take away the tail and add legs-

Marius knew his face gave away his emotions, his anger mostly. "-Alfred go with Lillie." Arthur practically pushed Alfred into his sister. Neither of them needed any more instructions their father's tone gave them more than enough incentive to take off.

Marius stayed silent and let the children go. Once he was sure they were out of earshot he started. "How could you-!"

Arthur shoved his index in Marius's face silencing him. "Don't! Don't you dare turn around and yell at me!" Arthur snarled as he turned to face Marius.

"They're humans!"

"Not anymore! Marius, I wiped their memories, they think they're one of us-"

"-But they aren't! They're human! How did you even...? Why?! You hate humans!"

"I... well, I have you to thank for it, don't I?" Arthur changed his tone to a more condescending one, and it instantly made Marius's blood boil. "You caused the boat to sink, they were on it. All three of them! They were in an air pocket, Marius. They would have died-"

"-You should have left them there!"

"You can't be that heartless! They're children!"

"I didn't care when I sank that boat, I don't care now. The fewer humans the better!"

*"Who hurt you in such a way that you'd wish death on children who, I might add, have done **nothing** to you!"*

Marius growled suddenly as he felt his magic flare-up. "I've seen it for myself! I've witnessed the horrors that humans can do! I'm doing us a service by killing them off and you and Lukas are either obsessed with them or taking them in to raise!" Marius didn't attack, but he just couldn't stop the blast of energy leave his body. Arthur didn't go flying, in fact, he hardly moved at all.

Still, when all was said and done, Arthur kept his demeanor calm. "I think it'd be best if you left, Marius."

Marius felt stubborn, but... he still valued Arthur as a friend, even if he was mad. "...Fine." Marius spat. "But this conversation isn't over, Arthur. Those children shouldn't be here."

"Marius, I can't believe this needs to be said to you of all people, but if you make any attacks on my children It won't be the humans you'd have to worry about. You're not the only one who's been working on their magic. "

"...His name is Emil."

It had taken a lot of work on Marius's part a lot of talking and promises, but eventually, it seemed Lukas did forgive him. It started slow, but here they were now almost a year after 'The incident', both Arthur and Lukas like to call it, and Lukas was now showing off his new pride and joy.

"He just... started following me. I can't explain it." Lukas's voice may have been emotionless, but his eyes were gleaming. Emil was tiny, just old enough to be swimming on his own, but not old enough to be surviving. Emil kept himself attached to Lukas's side, hugging it tightly like a lifeline. "I... well, you know I've never wanted children of my own." He spoke in a more serious tone.

"Well, he's certainly adorable... you know you two look alike, maybe he's your actual brother?" Marius could only question as he circled around before going down and bringing his arms out in an attempt to lure Emil towards him. "But if you don't want him, I'll happily take him in."

What happened next surprised him, but not Lukas. Emil came at Marius. He hissed and spat, puffing his chest out as he weaved in and out like he was going to attack. Then just as quickly as he had done it he backed off and hid behind Lukas once again.

"I don't think he wants you," Lukas said without hesitation as he patted Emil's head.

There were a few seconds of silence before Marius suddenly busted out laughing. "Oh my goodness! He's got some spunk."

"Yeah, he does!" Lukas broke his emotionless voice at that moment as he grinned and spoke loud. He was proud. With a clear of his throat, he went back to his emotionless face and tone. "Regardless, have you been talking to Arthur lately?" Lukas changed the subject as he held on to Emil's hand. "He seems happy."

Marius had been keeping his distance from Arthur these days. Not only did Arthur have all five of his children to look after, but Marius was like... ninety-five percent sure that Arthur was courting someone. Who? Marius didn't know, but those rare days Marius would come by Arthur would have this love-stricken look on his face while smiling and laughing to himself.

Marius would frown at the thought. He knew Arthur was never celibate and would be looking soon the older he got...

But Marius would be lying to himself if he didn't feel a tad hurt by it. He had shown interest in Arthur in the past, bringing him food, stopping by often, if not a little too much, but Arthur never got the hint and would shoo him off. Marius would have considered continuing his pursuit of Arthur. After all, they were equal magic-wise and almost a perfect match in some ways.

That was If Arthur hadn't adopted those human brats.

"Yeah, I noticed." Marius settled on saying with a sigh. "I'm sure he's found a mate, right? I believe he talks to you more than me nowadays."

"Hm." Lukas actually didn't respond to Marius's question. He just hummed and shut his eyes.

This time Marius hummed, but not to confirm that he heard Lukas, more out of curiosity. If Lukas did know something he wasn't telling and that alone made Marius a little more wary of the situation.

If it was just a mate then what was the big deal? They were growing up and Marius no longer wanted to pursue Arthur for himself, not that Lukas knew he wanted Arthur at all.

Unless this mate wasn't a normal mate.

Marius bit his lip as he thought on it for like... a second. Taking in human children that were dying would be one thing, but taking a human as a mate?

'Preposterous! You're thinking too hard about this.' Marius told himself. "So what of you?" Marius suddenly asked Lukas as the air became too quiet for too long. "Any mates?"

Lukas scoffed before laughing. "No, I'd rather not."

"You say that now-" Marius became playful when he reached out and pulled Lukas into a half-hug. "But you'll find someone who'll turn your life around and you'll think 'damn.' I can't live without them- Ah!" Marius should have expected Emil to come at him, but he didn't, thankfully Lukas had and managed to grab Emil by his hips just in time for Marius to see tiny teeth snapping at him.

Emil growled as Lukas pulled him back. "Ah. I'm going to have my hands full with this one. I don't think I'll have time for a mate." Lukas muttered as he pulled Emil into a hug. Emil glared at Marius but accepted the hug.

"Yeah, you are." Marius let go of Lukas and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "Did Arthur have to deal with this?" Marius brought his finger over towards Emil and nearly got bit when he tried to poke Emil's nose.

"Nope, but I'm sure I'll break him out of this mindset before too long." Lukas smiled at Marius. It was just a small little smile but it was there.

"Is he magical?"

Lukas's smile dropped. "I don't know. Not that it matters, I still love him regardless."

"That's all that matters in the end."

It took almost a whole year, but it finally happened.

"-I'm serious about this. I really am." Lukas sighed to Arthur. Lukas and Arthur were hanging out together near Arthur's nesting area, his children all wandering around, Liam was showing the twins how to hide themselves in case of danger while Lillie was swimming nearby with Peter. Emil sat diligently by Lukas's side playing in the sand while Lukas and Arthur both laid out where the sun hit them and helped warm them up.

They were talking and Marius paid no mind to their conversation when he swam up behind them.

"The time has come! Ta-dah!" Marius was absolutely over the moon when he held Petru out to Arthur and Lukas. Neither merman expected him and jumped in shock. The moment Lukas jumped Emil went for the kill, but Lukas managed to grab Emil by his tail and bring him back.

Petru laughed and giggled as he wiggled out of Marius's grip.

"Oh boy, where'd you find him?" Arthur questioned as he swam up to Petru.

"... wandering around." Marius hummed as he reached over and grabbed Petru and pulled him into a hug. Petru looked up at Marius and grinned happily. "I watched him for a few days when nobody showed, I took him. His name is Petru, by the way."

"..." Arthur gave Marius an unimpressed look.

"What?"

"That's a little close to 'Peter' don't you think?" Arthur raised an eyebrow as he asked and Marius scowled a little.

"Well, I'm not changing it. So deal with it." Marius then stuck his tongue out. "Same name, different pronunciation." He settled the matter then and there. Arthur just rolled his eyes and let it drop.

"So this means... we all have children around the same age?" Lukas asked as he had to physically hold Emil still in his arms. "Stop it, Emil." he sternly spoke when Emil started to struggle. It worked and Emil settled down.

"Yeah, I guess it does." Marius nodded his head, he had to bite his tongue though, or else he might say something rude about Arthur's children. "So, this means they'll grow up with one another and won't be alone like we were." Marius hummed blissfully at the hopeful thought that popped in his head. He grinned as he held Petru in his arms afraid to let go of his newfound bundle of joy.

Marius quickly noticed the uncomfortable air that started to hang around them. Arthur wouldn't look at him, while Lukas focused mainly on Emil, both of them frowning. "So, Marius, how exactly did you find Petru? I'm sure you have to be dying to tell us? Like was he around your area? Or did he find you?" Arthur suddenly changed the subject as he came up and lightly poked Petru in the nose. Petru giggled at that.

"Not really." Marius dropped the subject like a rock, making Arthur blink in shock. "Just know that I found him and he's mine now."

Arthur and Lukas shared a concerned look before just allowing the subject to drop. "Very well, mate. He is cute, and he looks a bit like you too boot. Look at that brown hair!" Arthur

ruffled Petru's hair. Petru responded by reaching up and grabbing Arthur's hand into both of his tiny hands. Arthur just smiled at Petru.

"He's going to grow up big and strong like me." Marius couldn't help but grin as he tried (Keyword: Tried) to flex his arms.

Lukas was the one to say it: "You have driftwood for muscles."

"Rude!"

Arthur just chuckled before lazily laying back down under the sunlight. Marius looked at Arthur for a moment and then smirked to himself. "So, Arthur, since we're asking questions. The word going around is that you have yourself a potential mate?"

There was a pregnant silence between all three of them after that. Marius couldn't see Arthur's face as Arthur was laying on his stomach. "Don't be silly." Arthur suddenly barked out a laugh. "I have five children to look after! The last thing I need in my life is a mate to come in and... what? Muck things up? I have a good thing going, no mate required."

Marius wasn't convinced so he looked to Lukas for help. Lukas was, conveniently, busy talking to Emil. So, Marius decided to just point out the facts. "Well, forgive my boldness, but I've been seeing you lately. You seem a lot more... mmm..."

"Happy. I think the word you're looking for is 'happy'." Lukas spoke up for Marius.

Arthur laughed again. "I've always been happy, Marius."

"Yeah, twirling around? Laughing to yourself? I've only seen you do that stuff when we were younger."

"Psh." Arthur scoffed. "You're thinking too much about things, mate. I don't have any mates lined up, if I did wouldn't I have introduced them to you two yet?" Arthur challenged and that made Marius pause.

"Well... I would say you have a good point... but you hid your children from us. Both sets, not just the-" Arthur narrowed his eyes at Marius daring him to say anything inappropriate. "- Not just your second set of children." Marius settled on saying as he really didn't want a fight.

Petru cooed as he reached up and suddenly gave Marius's hair a rather painful tug. "Ow-" It was at that moment did Petru reach up with his other hand and pull Marius's lip up to look at his fangs. "-ah, now why is this familiar?" Marius gently pulled Petru's hand away from his mouth.

Arthur chuckled. "I had my reasons for my children. Liam and Lillie were wary of any newcomers and... well... I don't need to explain Peter and the Twins, now do I? Regardless, a mate is different. If I had one I would have showed them off to you or Lukas. Besides, who needs mates when I have friends like you and Lukas!"

'You really love lying through your teeth, don't you Arthur?'

Marius clenched his fists so tightly that he thought he was going to pierce his palms with his nails. Honestly, Marius finding the truth was a bit of an accident. He was experimenting with his magic as he wanted a way to keep an eye on Petru if, and when, Petru would start adventuring off on his own. Just as a precaution.

It was one of the easiest things he ever created. All he had to do was simply think of the person or soul he wanted to see and with a bit of magic he made a window of sorts. He was able to look at them, but it seemed that they couldn't see him. It was perfect!

He was testing the range and its effectiveness when he stumbled upon Arthur's dirty secret.

*To see Arthur with two legs was just unnatural and made Marius shudder the longer he looked, but to see Arthur **dancing** and be intertwined with this other human just made Marius absolutely sick.*

*Marius hated to admit it, but learning the truth put him in a brooding mood. He did what he could to care for Petru, but the days dragged on all he could think was how...**Betrayed** he felt.*

Betrayal turned to anger, which in turn started to turn to denial, which then turned into a sick obsession. He was convinced that he had seen wrong at first. That his magic turned faulty. So, he'd started to regularly watch Arthur in his spare time.

Everything seemed normal enough. Arthur certainly had his hands full with five children and whenever Marius would watch him Arthur was almost certainly yelling and punishing one of the twins, sometimes he'd be yelling at Peter, or Lillie even. Once Marius caught Arthur having to wipe Alfred's memory down for a second time. Apparently he had remembered something that Arthur didn't like.

Regardless, Marius was starting to question his own magic by that point as weeks had passed. He thought: 'Maybe it wasn't Arthur I saw, but a lookalike? After all those human brats of his look like him.' But as mentioned. This had become an obsession of Marius's. He couldn't just stop. He tried telling his magic to look for the man that 'looked like Arthur' many times. He was certain he was right.

So, Marius decided he wasn't going to stop watching until he saw it, and it turned out that Marius was a silly man. He would often be watching Arthur during the day or during down time when Petru would be napping or sleeping. He never thought about night time when he would be sleeping as well.

Arthur had a double life. During the day hours he would be an obedient father to his five children, but at night he was pretending to be human. Marius only watched the one night, but he was sure that Arthur would often leave when his children slept, and then go and hang out with these new human friends of his, and go and rest at his mate's home, go back to the ocean, and repeat. Marius also got his confirmation that night as well. Watching this man affectionately kiss Arthur's neck and lips all night was more than enough for Marius.

Clearly Arthur was no longer happy with their friendship, not if he was seeking out humans for companionship. 'I should have known he'd go running to the humans. Did he even hate humans? Was that a Lie? Was... was our friendship based on lies!? How many lies has he told me?' Marius growled as he suddenly gnashed his teeth. His friendship with Arthur was **done**. Clearly Arthur didn't want Marius's companionship and therefore no longer deserved it. For Marius at that moment his anger became something else entirely as he declared the end of their friendship. This was betrayal, plain and simple, and Arthur knew this hence why he tried to keep it a secret.

There's a reason why betrayal is often referred to as one of the worst things a person could go through.

Marius had come to tell Lukas of Arthur's betrayal and how he needed Lukas's help. Petru and Emil were both busy playing nearby while the adults spoke. Lukas's reaction wasn't what Marius had expected. At all.

"...I'm leaving. I'm no longer staying in the ocean."

"W-What?"

"..." Lukas turned his head with a sigh. "Arthur isn't the only one living a double life with the humans. Unlike him, however, I refuse to have one arm in the ocean and one arm on the sand. Instead, I'm taking Emil and I'm going to live amongst the humans."

For Marius it felt like his soul was sucked out of his body in that moment. "You... can't." Was the only thing Marius could whisper at that moment.

"My mind is already made up. I've met a nice man who's willing to take Emil and I in and-"

Honestly, Lukas should have seen Marius's attack coming and on some level, he had as he twisted his body so his back took the brunt of the attack; and in all Honesty, **Marius** should have seen Lukas's counterattack coming from a mile away. He didn't and as a result, got tossed right into a boulder.

Marius's shoulder smacked right into the boulder; he was sure he felt the bone crack upon impact. Marius grabbed onto his shoulder and clenched his teeth at the absolute burning and throbbing pain. A loud muffled grunt left his mouth as he glared at Lukas.

Lukas wasn't looking any better. Marius's attack had left a long welt from the top of Lukas's shoulder that slanted down to the middle of his back. This welt in question was already showing signs of blistering. Lukas was hunched over; his own teeth gritted as he panted heavily.

And it was at that exact moment did it finally fully sink in for Marius as his mind had one thought and one thought only: 'Was Lukas ever planning on telling you this if you hadn't have come to him first?'

"I see..." Marius suddenly spat out as he started to rise. "You were just planning to leave without telling me, weren't you? Just hoping you'd disappear and I'd forget about you!?" He thought of all the times Lukas tried to change his nest and realized he was right.

"I think you need to leave-"

Marius launched another attack, it was just a ball of energy that would have knocked Lukas onto the ocean floor, shame Lukas predicted an attack this time around and properly used his magic to shield him from the attack. All it did was move Lukas back a couple of inches from the impact.

*It just made Marius angrier as he forgot about his pain long enough to try and use his magic as a sort of whip in an attempt to hit Lukas again. "The humans will **never** accept you!" Marius almost screamed as he struck against Lukas's shield again and again with his magic.*

It seemed his magic was making some damage as with each strike the shield was starting to break piece by piece. The shield was only as strong as its owner. Bit by bit the shield started to break away, Lukas was huddled behind it, flinching with each hit.

Marius cocked his arm back and felt his magic flare like never before. He saw the bit of shield left that he needed to get rid of and was sure that this attack would do it in.

"Stop it!" Right as Marius released his attack he saw a flash of silver hair get between him and Lukas, and he knew it was too late to stop the attack.

Emil got hit, yes, the poor kid went flying into the ocean floor, he kicked up sand as his body made an impact with the ground.

Marius actually felt bad as his anger was towards Lukas, not Emil and at that moment he felt his magic dissipate as he looked at Emil's still form for just a second. Marius gasped as before he knew it, his arms were bound to his side, but it wasn't just that. Lukas kept a hold of the magic that kept Marius in place.

Lukas. Was. Pissed.

His eyes glowed not just from his magic, but also from his clear and utter anger at that moment. He didn't look like the Lukas that Marius had grown up and played with. Lukas looked like a cornered animal that was finally able to bite back. "Wai-"

Lukas didn't let Marius finish his plea, instead, he used his magic to slam Marius into the nearest thing he could find. Which just so happened to be the boulder that Marius had slammed into before. A cry left Marius's mouth as he couldn't use his arms to shield himself from the attack and thus his shoulder was reintroduced to the boulder in question and because he never healed it before...

It wasn't a fun experience having a cracked shoulder get completely shattered.

Marius let out a blood-curdling scream as the pain erupted from his shoulder. He was sure if he had control of his arms he would be cradling that shoulder. The splitting pain was

excruciating, but as luck would have it, Lukas wasn't done. He still had Marius bound and had full control.

Marius was smashed into the ground face first, again with no way to protect himself. He felt his nose shatter and when he jerked up he could taste the blood in the water. Lukas let out an animalistic growl and suddenly did it again. Marius groaned in pain as he knew his lip was busted this time around and he tasted more blood and he was sure Lukas was going to go for the third attack-

"-Stop hurting big brother!" Petru rushed to Lukas and made a pitiful grab at Lukas's hands. "Stop it!" Petru wailed as he weakly punched Lukas's chest.

For a moment Marius feared that Lukas would harm Petru, but Lukas never made a move towards the little Merboy. He just glared down at Petru.

"...Lukas..." Emil looked scared as he rose from the floor. There was an angry red welt that went from under his left arm and crossed up to his right eye. He shook violently and didn't look like that little piranha that Lukas adopted a year ago. He had tears in his eyes that floated up and away the moment they left. Emil then sniffled and suddenly started to cry a little more violently.

That got Lukas out of his murderous rage. Marius's binds were lifted, however, before he knew it he was pushed back. "Leave!" Lukas hissed as he swam up and poked Marius right in the chest. "Leave and never return! Do you hear me! You are no longer welcomed in my life!" Lukas was crying when he yelled it and with one final burst of magic, Marius was tossed out of Lukas's nesting area along with Petru.

He only stared at the barrier that Lukas had suddenly put up between the door and Marius.

Marius only felt numb as he stayed in that spot. His right arm was basically dead, pain radiating from every inch of his body as blood continued to pour out of his nose and busted lip.

He lost both of his friends in the span of a day and for a moment he felt lost.

That was until Petru gently touched his good shoulder. "I'll heal big brother!" Petru announced boldly and loudly as he shut his eyes tightly and looked like he was trying to concentrate. Marius felt a bit of hope. He wasn't lost and he didn't need those traitors. He had Petru and that's all that matters.

He'll go home, heal, and figure out what to do from there.

It took a while for Marius to heal from the wounds Lukas had inflicted on him. Namely: his shoulder took more than one excruciatingly painful healing session to completely heal, but eventually everything was put back into place.

Word travels fast between three parties, and Arthur was not happy.

Marius had just hardly left his nest when Arthur bounded him. Only this binding was different from before. It was like a weight was added to his tail as Marius's hands were forced together and he was sunken to the bottom of the ocean unable to move and as an extra 'fuck you' Arthur forced Marius into silence by covering his mouth with his hand.

Arthur cupped his fingers against Marius's cheekbones and forced Marius to look at him.

Arthur's lips were pressed into a thin line, his eyes were glowing with both magic and unbridled anger. His eyebrows were furrowed down and his eyes narrowed. "How dare you!" Arthur spat at Marius. "How dare you spy on me! And how dare you attack Lukas! Are you out of your mind!? What has gotten into you, Marius!?" It was when he finished talking did Arthur let go of Marius's mouth.

"I'm not one of your children, traitor! Do not talk to me like that!" Marius snarled at Arthur. Marius was unable to move his tail at all so he settled on just awkwardly leaning towards the left towards Arthur.

"Really? Because you've been acting like one as of late!"

Marius fought against the bonds around his wrists, but Arthur knew him well.

"Struggle all you like-" Arthur crossed his arms over his chest. "-I won't let up. Not until you just talk to me!"

"Why?! So you can just turn around and lie to my face?! Because that's all you've been doing!" Marius yelled as he continued to violently struggle against the bonds.

*"Marius, you want the truth? Fine. I didn't tell you about Francis or my boys because it's starting to get to the point that you're **scaring** me! You've already scared Lukas off!"*

"Who are you to act all high and mighty around me! How are you going to preach about 'talking to you' when you yourself just couldn't talk to me!?"

"You want to know why I didn't talk to you? Because your reaction is just as I feared it would be! If I would have told you I've taken in a human as a mate- I- I can't even think about it! You've been acting so unhinged as of late that-" Arthur cut himself off and just shook his head.

Marius felt his chest become heavy as he exhaled slowly. "That what?"

"-That I can't do it anymore!" Arthur yelled as the tears started to prickle in his eyes. "I tried to trust you again after the boat incident, I really did, but then you found out about my boys and it just felt like it all went downhill from there!"

"Because they aren't 'your boys' they're humans! They don't-" Marius did not expect the slap to the face. Sure, he expected a magical attack or something similar but he'd never expect a physical attack. It stunned him.

"Shut-up! For the love of god just shut-up!" Arthur wailed.

Silence. Then Arthur uttered two words that Marius was growing familiar with. "I'm leaving."

Marius stopped his struggling. Yes, just days ago, he said Arthur was his enemy, but... why did it still hurt to hear those words?

"Francis knows everything and agrees, the boys should be on the land, not in the water. He knows of the boat and knows that I could very well be charged if seen with the boys. So... we've come up with a plan. I'm not just leaving the ocean, Marius... I'm leaving this area. We're going to a new place, a place where Francis was born."

"...What of Liam and Lillie?"

"They've agreed to swim that far out, but they don't wish to be on the land. I respect their wishes even if it saddens me to do so..." Arthur whispered the last part. "My mind is made up and there's nothing you can say or do to stop it either." Arthur crossed his arms over his chest and sighed softly.

Marius sighed in return. "It just... can't be over between the three of us. We were going to change things-"

"Those are childish dreams, Marius. We're grown up now, with children and lives to live. Like it or not, I don't care-" Arthur waved his hands and Marius's bonds were removed. "-I'm moving on and so should you." Arthur almost took off, but he paused before doing so. "Goodbye, Marius. I hope you and Petru live long lives." and finally with those words Arthur took off before Marius could react.

Marius simply stayed there for several long seconds unable to say anything as he watched Arthur go. Marius then stared down at his hands as he gripped at the wet sand. He watched the sand slip from his fingers and float back down to the ground. For Marius he felt like everything was slipping from him at that moment.

Then he heard it. It was just a small voice that was starting to grow louder as the seconds ticked by. It kept repeating in his head over and over again that he just couldn't ignore it.

Make him stay.

It felt foolish. After all if Arthur wanted to leave then let him, but the thought of Marius being alone while both Lukas and Arthur left to pretend to be humans on the surface...

It was a sickening kind of madness.

Make him stay.

Nothing Marius could say or do would ever make Arthur change his mind. Arthur made that clear already, didn't he? Besides, Arthur wasn't his friend anymore!

MAKE HIM STAY!

Well... there was one thing Marius could do... wasn't there?

Marius pressed his lips into a thin line as he clenched his fist so tightly that the grains of sand started to dig into the soft part of his palms. He had no qualms about killing humans, he made this clear already. But Francis was a special case.

Arthur wasn't a merperson to be crossed, he had powers that Marius never wanted to see. To kill Francis would be a death sentence undoubtedly.

But you're smarter than that, aren't you? There's a trick. If you don't get caught then Arthur will never know it was you and would be forced to stay as a result. That devilish part of his brain argued.

'But he'll know it was me! Arthur isn't stupid!'

He knows you'll never step foot on land. That's what Arthur knows. If you kill Francis on the land Arthur will never know.

Marius was starting to agree with this devilish little voice of his. He was starting to think he was crazy, but as the seconds ticked away he realized that no. He wasn't crazy. He didn't want Arthur to stay because he wanted his companionship. Those days were gone.

He wanted Arthur to suffer.

He wanted Lukas to suffer.

*He wanted them **both** to suffer. They were traitors, abandoning the sea to be with the humans. They were no better than their parents that abandoned them and Marius wanted them both to know it.*

Make them stay.

The wheels clicked into place and Marius started his scheming.

Arthur first, Lukas second. That was Marius's plan.

Kill Francis first and foremost as Arthur was planning on leaving the town and the ocean with him before the year was up. Lukas was staying in the town. Therefore he could take longer.

Marius had a small window of time for everything to unfold and he couldn't afford any mess ups.

He went from working on the easiest thing he's ever created, the window, to the hardest thing he's ever created.

After watching Francis for a few days, and some nights, he learned that Francis wasn't exactly a foolish man. If Marius were to just come up to him, Francis would be wary if not on the edge of caution. Marius could see that Francis was able to hold his own if time came to it.

Francis couldn't be on edge, yes, Marius had magic on his side, but Lukas showed him that magic had it's faults if one were distracted. If Francis were to get the better of Marius in any way shape or form...It wouldn't be good.

So, Marius got to work on a way to disguise himself. He got the idea from camouflage, if they could change the colors of their tails to match their surroundings, then who's to say they couldn't change their physical shape as well.

This was slightly different. He needed a way to look like Arthur. Exactly like him, to blend in with the humans and he found his way, but it didn't come easy.

To manipulate his camouflage with magic and change his appearance was crazy and something he never even thought of doing. It took a lot of testing, but he eventually found a way that just might work. If his theory was right though, he couldn't go off memory of Arthur, he needed something of Arthur's. Something that would have his print on it, something that would, for sure, change Marius into the look he wanted.

The most logical thing Marius needed was a hair. But how? Arthur wouldn't let him near, after what happened with Lukas. In fact, Marius tried once and Liam stopped him. "My instructions were clear. You aren't allowed here." Liam puffed his chest out when he said this. Marius wasn't about to scrap with a child so he left.

Marius tried again when Lillie was on guard. She seemed a little more sympathetic and empathetic towards Marius. "I'm sorry, Uncle Marius, but daddy was clear! You aren't allowed here anymore... I heard about what happened with Lukas and Emil..."

"But Lillie-"

"You need to go." She spoke a little more firmly but couldn't look at him.

Marius decided to just go before she alerted Liam or Arthur.

He sat there in his cave, thinking, stewing. All while Petru rested in his lap. Absentmindedly he ran his hands through Petru's hair as he sat about it. A few strands of Petru's hair came off in Marius's hand, this was normal just loose strands that were ready to fall.

He stared at those small brown bits of hair before looking down at Petru. He then felt his mouth split into a grin. He was going about this all wrong.

The next day he had a new plan. He had to be discrete as he didn't want to alert Liam or Lillie. He had a feeling they'd be on the lookout for him. So, he swam on the outskirts of Arthur's territory making sure to keep himself hidden and out of sight.

Marius eventually slipped into the territory and kept himself so low to the ground that he was practically eating the sand. Eventually he slipped into Arthur's nesting spot. The old ship creaked every so often and honestly Marius wondered how Arthur could sleep in such a thing with his children.

"Now, how'd I know you'd try something like this? Why can't you take a hint?" Arthur was behind him in a heartbeat.

Marius got up and off the ground, his tail slowly flickering back to normal. "Well, you're not giving me much of a choice, aren't you?" Marius challenged as he got up to Arthur's level. Arthur crossed his arms over his chest and snorted.

"If you've come to try and talk me out of it, save it. I already told you, my mind is made up, Marius." Arthur turned his back to Marius.

"I know. It's just... I've come to say something else, actually, please, if you just give me a couple seconds of your time?"

Arthur tsked his tongue and sighed and simply looked over his shoulder. "I guess... if it's that important that you felt the need to risk getting blasted back to your own territory." Arthur turned back around. "Make it quick. I don't have all day."

"Okay, here it goes. I'm sorry."

Arthur blinked in surprise. He opened his mouth before closing it. "Uh... really?" was all Arthur could finally say. The shock in his tone was clear and loud as day.

"Yes, I've taken the last few days to think about all that's happened between us, You're right. I have been acting a little unhinged." Marius rubbed the back of his head. "It's your life, not mine. I just wish I could apologize to Lukas all the same." Marius sighed.

"Marius..."

"That's it, that's all I wanted to tell you. I wish you and Francis a happy fulfilling life-" Marius turned and started to take off.

"Marius, wait. Do you mean it?" Arthur asked. Marius kept his head turned and smirked before letting it vanish from his face and turning around to face Arthur.

"Of course." He spoke to Arthur softly.

Arthur sighed before his body relaxed and his eyes seemed to soften. "That honestly makes me happy to hear. At least we won't be leaving on bad terms..." Arthur blushed stubbornly as he spoke.

Marius knew this was the moment to strike and so he opened his arms. "One last hug? Before you leave?"

"...fine." Arthur relented and requested Marius's wish.

They hugged and Marius reached up and lightly patted Arthur's hair. "I'm going to miss you." Marius whispered as he finally dragged his hand away from Arthur's hair, his prize already clamped tightly in his palm.

Arthur kept the blush on his face. "I'm going to miss you too, but this is for the best."

"You're right. It is."

Having his tail ripped violently in two was not fun. Marius was in so much pain by the time it ended that he couldn't even attempt to walk. He crawled out of the ocean and all the way onto the dry sand and forced himself on to his back.

"Shit..." He grumbled after a few moments of just laying there. Finally Marius forced himself up to his feet. His knees wobbled and he almost fell back into the sand, but Marius willed himself to stay standing. "Whoa." A shocked whisper left his mouth when his knees nearly gave out on him.

"I got this." He took a step forward, his knees buckled again, but he wasn't letting that stop him. He was on a mission and he wasn't going to stop. If he fell, he got right back up. Marius walked along the beach. The sand was hot under his newfound feet and even burned, so he kept close to the shore. He soon found walking to be rather easy.

The sound of joyful screaming made him stop and turn. There was a family nearby. None on the beach, but they were all swimming happily in the water. Marius couldn't help but grin. Humans mean bags and bags may mean clothing. Something Marius knew he was going to need.

So, he turned and looked around while the family was distracted and he frowned. No bag insight. Meaning these humans were smarter than he took them for. But that didn't mean he was helpless. As the humans left towels behind.

So, without thinking he marched up, took a decently sized towel, and just kept walking. He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked up to the sidewalk. It felt weird for him. The sidewalk was rough against his bare feet and if he focused on it he could feel the skin peel.

Are humans this fragile?

Marius frowned and he walked a bit up the sidewalk. "I'm uncomfortable." He grumbled to himself and it was true, he was very uncomfortable. The noises were louder on the land than in the sea, plus he felt abnormally heavy as his body swayed with each step he was afraid he'd collapse. It didn't help that he had to keep one hand on the towel to stop it from slipping.

'How can they like this?' He thought to himself, the sun was already drying his hair, making it hard and it felt crusty when he touched it. His hair literally 'crunched' when he touched it. Marius was surprised it didn't fall out. The sun was hot, unbelievably so. He felt dried, like he was going to crumble to dust any minute now.

"Ow!" He cursed and jumped back when his foot made contact with something sharp. He now had to balance on one foot while he awkwardly lifted the other to look at it. The culprit was there embedded into the softness of Marius's sole. Glass.

"Humans." He cursed and grabbed the small sliver of glass between his nails and slowly pulled the glass out of his foot. "Great, I haven't even been here that long and I've already injured myself." Marius huffed and flicked the piece of glass away. It took little to no magic

for Marius to heal the cut on his foot. "If only I could use magic to make clothing." He spoke aloud and quickly looked around to make sure no one heard him. The coast was clear.

Marius continued his walk but stopped when he walked past, what the humans call, a car. He stopped and backstepped and peered inside the car. There on each seat of the car was a bag, plastic bags, Marius knew of those. In each plastic bag seemed to be just what he craved. Clothing.

He looked around and grabbed at the handle of one of the doors. Much to his delight, it opened easily. The inside of the car was hot and sticky. Marius didn't stay long. He just opened one bag and looked inside it just to make sure he wasn't taking children's clothing or women's clothing.

He was sure he was looking at women's clothing, so he reached over the seat and grabbed the second bag. This looked better and so he snatched the bag and slammed the car door shut. He then scurried off, not wanting to be caught. Humans don't look too fondly on thieves.

When Marius felt at a safe enough distance from the beach and out of the public eye between two buildings, he was working on how to wear human clothing. He laid each object out in front of him and looked. The shirt was simple for him to figure out. It was red with a collar around it. So he figured that his head went through where the shirt seemed to button up. He didn't bother with the buttons.

The shirt hung off of his body like loose skin. It was hot to wear and once again, Marius felt uncomfortable.

Then came the harder part. He was looking at two sets of pants... why?

He ignored the smaller set for now and focused on the blue jeans. He figured it was like the shirt. The button goes against you. It only made sense that way, after all humans couldn't button it from the back, could they?

So he slipped into them.

They were baggy on him. Really baggy. Still, It didn't take a genius to know how to work a button or zipper and regardless of that if he were to let go of the pants they would just fall off his waist. So, he had to awkwardly hold those up with one hand.

"I guess this works..." He grumbled slightly as he got what he wanted, kinda, he had clothing and he'll figure out what to do from there. He wasn't exactly comfortable, the clothes didn't feel right and he knew if he wanted to blend in for the time being he was going to need better clothing than this.

"Well, what's this?" Marius pulled something out of the plastic bag. It was small and square, the surface was smooth but worn showing frequent use. It opened at one end and so he did just that. He was met with cards made of plastic and then he saw it had a second opening on top.

He opened that and saw green. "Money?" He knew a bit about human money. He often saw children beg for money to be given to the man that had the ice cream cart. He knew that this green stuff can be used in exchange for things.

Marius knew he could probably use this to get clothing that fit him properly... but he didn't know how much he held nor did he know where to get clothing! "I guess, I'll just keep it." He grumbled and stuffed the cash in his pocket. He didn't need the rest of the things and so he just tossed them back in the bag and stalked off. He got what he wanted for now.

After a week of hiding amongst the humans, Marius was finally starting to understand things. He understood how to buy his own clothes, how to tie shoelaces, how to properly button a shirt, and most importantly, he learned what the second set of pants did. Underpants, it turns out they were important to humans. Who knew?

Marius, of course, checked in on Petru while on the land, as he had promised. He would use his window to make sure Petru was doing well on his own. Marius was happy he had adopted such a quick hunter as every time he saw Petru, he was almost always eating something.

Marius bought clothing with the cash he had stolen. It wasn't much, but it fit better than the stuff he was wearing. He didn't need anything fancy. Just something that fit and yes, he bought socks and shoes after tearing up his feet for almost a whole week. But the day was finally coming and he needed to be prepared. With what little cash he had on him he walked into a store to buy a knife. The person almost didn't want to give the knife to Marius as: "You look rather young..."

He wasn't going to be stopped, not while he was so close. So, Marius leaned over and grabbed the man's hand harshly "I need it..." he snarled, he hadn't intended on using magic, it just happened. Before Marius knew it the man bagged the knife up and just gave it to him. Marius felt a little stunned but took the knife and left.

"If I would have known I could do that I wouldn't have bought anything!" Marius laughed once he was alone. "Magic, you come through again..."

Marius looked at his prize. It wasn't a normal kitchen knife. This was something called a 'tactical knife.' according to the humans. It was sharper than most knives and Marius was sure it wouldn't disappoint.

The big day came and it was time for Marius to put his magical skills to the test. He stood on the beach dressed in his new garb and he knew that Francis would be on his way now.

He snapped his fingers and Arthur's strand of hair popped into the palm of his hand. "Now or never..." Marius felt physically sick doing this, but if his tests proved right...

He opened his mouth and placed the hair on his tongue. Marius instantly gagged at the feeling of a hair in his mouth. He tried his hardest not to vomit then and there. Marius focused his mind on his magic as he knew what needed to be done. Thankfully, the hair started to melt away and for just a second Marius started to relax.

Then came the pain.

It was the most excruciating thing Marius ever had to endure. His bones twisted and snapped into different positions and he was forced to his knees. His eyes stung and watered while their shape and color changed. His back arched as he laid there on the ground screaming with every change. His fangs shrunk, and his teeth rearranged themselves. Marius let out a scream as something in his back popped and violently moved.

After what had to be an eternity of nothing but pain, suffering, and endless amount of tears, the pain finally seemed to subside. Marius was thankful that no humans seem to go this way.

The dry sand dug into his flesh the longer he stayed on his hands and knees and Marius knew he was going to have to get up eventually. First he shifted and fell back onto his thigh and groaned. His head spun and his whole body ached all the way down to his bones.

"I never want to do that again." He whispered as he stared at the setting sky.

Marius's energy felt drained and for a moment he wanted nothing more than to sleep-

*"No!" He forced himself up once he realized his eyes were closing. "No. Nope." He got himself to his feet hoping that'll help keep him awake. He couldn't sleep, if he slept and regained his energy lost then odds were Arthur would catch him. He had a small window to get this right and Arthur seeing **himself** wouldn't exactly be good.*

So, at the risk of looking dumb, Marius did a couple of stretches in the hopes that his body would stay awake and helped some of the aches go away. He didn't have to wait much longer.

"You're...here? So early?" Francis's voice cut through the air making Marius turn around and face him. Of course, he was Arthur now and he had to act the part. "You're a little ways up the beach... you should be careful, I warned you about nudity laws." Francis lightly scolded as he came up, but that melted away quickly as he looked at what Marius was wearing.

*"...Red is **not** your color, Love. You should stick to green or black..." Francis commented as he tugged on Marius's sleeve. Of course, when Marius picked out his clothes he actually didn't have Arthur's color scheme in mind. So, he picked colors he liked, red and brown. "Still, I can admire that you finally took a risk. It just didn't work." Francis winked before chuckling.*

Marius didn't know what to say. He had everything planned out perfectly, except for the talking part. So, his dumb mind could only say: "I liked the color..."

"No worries, you still have a lot to learn, I get it. When we go to France I'll show you all I know... now?" Francis smiled and offered his arm out. Marius froze for a moment.

Slowly, Marius linked their arms together and Francis started to walk.

'This is actually working?' Marius couldn't believe it. His heart started to race and he felt a strange sense of euphoria as he walked. His head was spinning wildly. Francis kept close to

him and Marius looked at him in disbelief. Obviously all this looking would cause Francis to look back at Marius in question.

Francis frowned as he looked at him. "I would ask if there was something on my face, but knowing you, you'd already tell me." He cracked a silly joke and it made Marius smirk a little. 'Yeah, Arthur would.' He thought for a moment reminding himself that he's Arthur and therefore needed to act like Arthur.

...easier said than done.

"There's just a lot on my mind..." Marius decided to say in a softer than intended voice.

"Oui, I would imagine... a lot will be happening in these coming days. The boys? Are they ready?" Francis stopped walking and looked at Marius with excitement gleaming in his eyes.

"Of course..."

Francis frowned and Marius could slap himself for being so awkward. He didn't know how to precede and it was showing. "Are...are you having second thoughts?"

Marius felt his lips purse into a line. He had so many things he could do and say at this moment but he found himself freezing.

"Okay... I was going to save this for later, but clearly... this needs to happen now." Francis suddenly started to dig through the pockets of his coat jacket. Marius felt an eyebrow raise in question when Francis started to get down on one knee. "I spent all week thinking of the perfect way to ask this, and I think just asking might do the trick. ... Arthur, will you spend the rest of your life with me?" Francis brought a small box out of his coat pocket and opened it. There was a shiny rock.

The world almost seemed to stop and move in slow motion. Marius felt his whole body freeze as he stared at the rock as it gleamed. Marius felt his breath get caught in his throat. He knew of this, he's seen humans do it a lot on the beach. It's called 'engagement' and if he was right, Marius knew that engagement meant marriage for humans.

Francis really wanted Arthur for a mate, and Marius was a hundred percent sure it was vise versa.

The world suddenly came rushing back to him when Marius remembered he was on a time crunch. "Of course!" He suddenly found himself lying. Francis beamed happily and before he could do anything else Marius wrapped his arms around Francis's neck in a wild hug.

"Oh!" Francis almost went toppling over by this sudden hug. He then started laughing. His laugh was different from most laughs, Marius found it humorous in itself as soft 'honhonhon's' left this man's mouth. Marius felt Francis's hand reach up to touch his hair. "That makes me glad..." Francis sighed out in relief.

'Idiot...' At that moment all of Marius's anger, rage, and rejection spilled out when he grasped the handle of his knife and with no hesitation plunged the blade deep into Francis's

back.

A gasp left Francis's mouth as he suddenly grasped on to Marius's jacket for dear life. When Marius pulled the blade out he really didn't expect that much blood to start to spill on to the sand. Marius then proceeded to push Francis off of him. Francis fell to the ground gasping in shock.

Marius's heart pounded inside his chest and he could feel something suddenly become 'off' with him. Whatever he was feeling he knew Francis could see it as the man's eyes went wide as he tried his hardest to get away.

It was like watching an injured fish try to swim from a shark.

Francis couldn't seem to get on his feet as he awkwardly scooted across the sand. "Stay-" Francis tried to yell at him but it was then that Marius rushed at him. Once again, Marius plunged the knife violently into Francis. This time in Francis's chest.

A gurgled scream left Francis's mouth, blood started to spill from his gaping mouth as he started to seize up. Marius thought that would be the strike that did him in, but Francis was still very much alive as his back arched and more blood started to seep from his mouth and back.

Marius yanked the knife out of Francis's torso and plunged it into another spot on Francis's body. Francis screamed out another loud agonizing scream so loud that it echoed all around the beach.

It was then did Marius realize what this 'off' feeling was as his hair swept in front of his eyes at his violent movement. His hair was brown, not blonde. His camouflage was melting away.

Francis suddenly stopped moving causing Marius to pause. "Heh..." Marius let go of the knife that was still embedded into Francis's body and leaned back for a second. It was done. He did what he set out to do and Francis was no more by the looks of it. Marius stood and started to dust his legs off.

Life was funny though.

There was no shout of alarm, nothing to indicate danger whatsoever, and Marius was completely put off guard when in a flash of green he was tossed so violently that he felt his body spin in the air before he landed painfully on his shoulder.

Marius only just got up on his elbows when he was tackled by an enraged Arthur. "You bastard!" Arthur wailed. Arthur managed to get Marius into a headlock, but Marius quickly sank his teeth into Arthur's arm in retaliation. Arthur screamed out once the pain registered. Marius took this moment to blast Arthur back with a burst of energy.

Arthur went flying for just a short moment before he hit the ground and rolled. Arthur got up just as quickly as he fell. The only thing behind his eyes was murder, pure and simple. Arthur charged again and this time Marius was prepared as he made a barrier between them-

But it wasn't enough.

All of Arthur's anger was put behind this massive strike. Marius's barrier was shattered instantaneously and the magic hit him right in the chest. For a moment Marius felt weightless as he flew through the air. His chest almost felt shattered as he couldn't even breathe. His back hit the water first and down, down, down he went.

Marius felt drained, his body broken, and he just couldn't think. As he sunk. He didn't even register that he got his tail back and his pants tore because of it. Marius hit the ocean floor and completely blacked out.

Marius had no clue how long he had been out for. When he woke he was honestly surprised he was alive to start with. His head was pounding and he found it hard to breathe gills or no gills. Marius's brain was in a fog when he slowly swam up.

Marius's body was ungodly heavy and he soon realized why when he looked down. He was still wearing the human clothes he bought. Marius had no energy and a part of him wanted to just blast the clothes off of his body, but no energy meant no magic, so, he had to instead painstakingly take each and every article of clothing off of his achy body. Minus socks and shoes as those flew off when his tail came back.

Once the clothing was off of his body he felt a little better but still achy and groggy.

Marius then had to make the swim back to his home. He felt exposed, he figured Arthur would come out of nowhere and strike him dead and there was nothing he could do about it. But the attack never came and soon Marius felt more at ease when he swam into his familiar territory. He was ready to lay down and just sleep for a few more days and let his body heal... again.

All was quiet. Just a little too quiet for his liking. "Petru? I'm back." he half heartedly called to his little brother. He expected Petru to rush to him, to want a hug immediately, demand how Marius was, the normal stuff, but all he was met with was silence. Marius put his hand to his head as he groaned softly. 'Had Petru left me?' a worrying thought crossed his mind as he thought about it. True, he was gone for a week, but he told Petru he'd be back...

Just like his own father had told him all those years ago.

"Petru?!" Marius tried again this time with a bit more panic as he picked up the pace and went for his nest-

*Marius felt like his heart was just ripped violently out of his chest. His nest, his cave, was nothing more than rubble. Undeniable traces of magic hung in the air. All of Marius's aches and pains were long forgotten as he squeezed his eyes shut and put a shaky hand to his chest. "Petru!" Marius feared the absolute worst, that Petru was **under** the rubble.*

Marius snapped his eyes open and dived for the rubble. "Petru!" He all but cried as he started to desperately dig. "Petru, say something!" Marius demanded as the tears threatened to spill out of the corners of his eyes. Rock after rock Marius feared he was getting nowhere, that he was too late, that his baby brother-

*"How could I let this happen?" Marius whispered as he started to claw at the ruins of his cave. His nails started to shred and break the more violent and desperate he clawed. "I didn't think Arthur would punish **you**! Petru! **Petru!** **PETRU!**" Marius felt a powerful wail bellow up from his throat as he cried for his baby brother. Marius let out a heartbreaking sob as he suddenly stopped his digging and slammed his fists into the uneven rocks and let out another agonizing wail.*

Marius for the first time in a long while cried into his arms as he laid there against the rubble of his home.

"Marius...?"

It was like a tiny voice from the heavens. Marius almost didn't even hear it, he painstakingly lifted his head up from his arms and looked up. There he was just off to Marius's side.

Marius noticed that it looked like Petru had dragged himself across the floor to get to him.

"Petru!" Marius was up and he raced over to his baby brother and lifted him up.

Petru went limp for a moment, his head lolled back the moment he was in Marius's arms. Petru looked horrible. His skin was a sickly gray color, and it looked as if he had no energy. "Petru..." Marius whispered as he held his brother close. "Where are you hurt? Let big brother heal you!"

Petru groaned loudly as he rested his head into the crook of Marius's neck.

So, he tried to heal Petru, his magic flickered and he touched Petru's back-

Petru let out an agonizing wail of pain that made Marius instantly stop what he was doing. He knew healing could be painful, especially when broken bones were involved, but Petru shouldn't be screaming like this.

Marius felt even more tired and thought that maybe, just maybe, he used the wrong type of magic. As silly as it sounded it was possible, his energy was low, too low. He needed rest, but he couldn't, not when Petru was hurt.

Petru whimpered weakly as he sniffled. "That hurt..."

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to hurt you." Marius whispered as he shifted Petru into his arms. "You're just going to have to hang on a little longer... big brother is weak and tired."

Petru just sniffled again. "Why'd you have to go? You left and I didn't know where you went..."

"I'm sorry, Petru. I had something I needed to do...."

"It was more important than me?"

"No... of course not."

"That's not what uncle Arthur said..." Petru suddenly started to cough, it was a loud cough that rattled in such a way that it made Marius worry. He feared Petru would start coughing blood next.

"Well, you don't have to worry about 'Uncle Arthur' and what he has to say anymore. What he said was wrong. You are one- no... you are the most important thing to me. I'm sorry I left for so long and I won't do that ever again." Marius whispered softly. Petru let out a soft 'hm' in response before dozing off in Marius's arms.

'It'll be fine.' Marius tried to reassure himself as he ran his fingers through Petru's hair. 'I'll sleep, heal him tomorrow and we'll just move on. Move away from this place. Everything will be alright.' Marius looked up at the surface just above him. He never wanted to go back there, never again. The shock of almost losing Petru was too much for him. Arthur won, Lukas won.

From now on it'll just be him and Petru and Marius was okay with that.

Marius woke with a start, he put his hand to his aching chest and swallowed hard as his heart thumped painfully. "What a nightmare..." he whispered as he breathed in and out heavily. Marius didn't even know he passed out, but it seemed he had. Not surprising, he was going overboard with his magic and his body needed to heal.

Marius groaned as he stood from his spot and took a look at his surroundings. Marius was on the beach, not surprisingly in the least. He saw that the sun was high in the sky, indicating that it had to be between noon and two o'clock. He dusted himself off, his body had a dull throbbing ache to it, no doubt from his tumble down the stairs from earlier. That's probably where his chest pain was coming from as well.

"Don't worry, Petru-" Marius whispered as he slowly started to strip himself of his clothes. "Big brother is going to heal you, one way or another." Marius swallowed hard. This was his last day, his last chance to make everything alright.

"It's time."

And with those two words, Marius jumped headfirst into the ocean. He didn't want to keep that boat waiting for too long.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit, This was the longest chapter I have ever written... ever! 31 chapters! I just couldn't continue until the blanks were all filled. Please, y'all I'm tired. I spent two weeks writing this... I need to sit down, listen to an audio book and crochet for a couple of days now.

Afternoon

"Ey, Máxi-"

Máximo turned and looked at Emma. She had her arms crossed over her chest looking rather perplexed. The two of them were at the docks, but then the parents showed up, and they were not happy. Ivan not only had to be the one to take over, as he was the only one who knew how to stop a crowd from becoming a riot.

Emma and Máximo were sent away. "Watch the streets; make sure nobody acts crazy, please." Ivan had to urge them away. So, with some reluctance away from the action they were now lazily patrolling the streets. It was the emptiest Máximo had ever seen because almost everyone in town was at the docks.

"Yeah, Emma?" He finally asked as he focused back on the road.

"-Maybe I'm going crazy, but I think we just passed Berwald Oxenstierna's work van."

"Okay, and?"

"Well... isn't he technically missing? His house was broken into earlier this morning... there seemed to be a struggle? He wasn't there? Ringing any bells?"

Máximo felt himself make a confused face. "You think we should pull it over?" He asked as got ready to turn his car around to find the van.

"It's best if you do because it could be one of two things. One: It's Berwald, just unaware of what happened. Or two:-

"-It could be the people who broke into his house."

"Bingo. Might as well get our quota for the day while we're out." Emma grinned and Máximo chuckled. So, he turned the car around and went down the street, Emma pointed him to the left and that's where he went.

The van was there at the very end of the street and it turned right. So, Máximo went down the street and turned right as the van did. Máximo felt his smug face turn into a frown.

Máximo sped up a bit to close the gap between the two vehicles. He got to a close enough distance and focused on the back windows of the van. The windows were tinted, but that didn't stop him from seeing the silhouette of a head in the back of the van. He saw the person move back, and he felt his frown deepen. So, with no hesitation, he hit the lights and the siren.

"There are people in the back." He swiftly explained to Emma.

Emma nodded. "Saw them." She confirmed.

"Should we prepare for the worst?"

"Nah... let's hope for the best first."

Máximo silently tapped his steering wheel before hitting the siren once more. For a moment he feared (and secretly hoped) that the van was going to speed off resulting in a chase. He's been itching for a thrill, but after a second or two, the van started to pull off to the side of the road. Máximo silently pulled over behind it. "Run the plates. I'll do the talking." Máximo ordered as he undid his seatbelt.

Emma scoffed. "Not fair. I'm the one who pointed the van out."

"I'll let you lead the next one." He promised her with a bit of a grin on his face.

"Whatever." was all he heard as he got out of his car. Máximo put his hands on his waist as he stared at the van for a moment, he tried to see inside the window, but he saw nothing from where he stood. Máximo kept his cool as he started to stalk up to the driver's side window. Not before quietly tapping the taillight.

Máximo got up to the driver's window, which the driver already rolled down.

"Berwald." Máximo blinked, honestly a little surprised to see Berwald driving, he was sure it was going to be whoever broke into Berwald's home. Máximo looked past Berwald towards the passenger side where another familiar face greeted him. "Mr. Honda... what a pleasure." Máximo calmly acknowledged Kiku.

"Is there something wrong, Officer Machado?" Berwald pulled Máximo's attention back on him.

"Uh, yeah. Berwald are you aware that your home was broken into this morning?"

Berwald Oxenstierna has always been a bit of an enigma when it came to facial expressions. The man was either stone-cold serious or deadly intimidating there was almost no in-between. So, when Berwald's facial expression didn't change, Máximo didn't know how to read it. "No." Berwald sighed. "I left early this morning." He grunted.

"I see. Well, you might want to get home. Make sure nothing is stolen."

"*Ja*, I'll do that."

Máximo tried to crane his neck to look into the back of Berwald's van. All he could see were lumps hidden under blankets and tarps. "What exactly are you hauling?" Máximo asked. Berwald couldn't say 'nothing' as clearly there was something under there.

"They're for me." Kiku answered for Berwald. "I commissioned him to make me an ottoman and a coffee table."

Máximo exhaled through his nose at this. Much like Berwald, Kiku had the irritating habit of being rather blank on his emotions, and like Berwald, Máximo was having a hard time reading Kiku's face. Still, something didn't seem right to Máximo. Mainly, he was *sure* he

saw a person in the back, Emma confirmed it. "Those don't exactly look like an ottoman and coffee table." he decided to press a bit as he leaned against the window.

"I take them apart when transporting them. It's easier that way, less chance of breaking, chipping, or scrapping." Berwald calmly explained.

The idea sounded plausible... yet... "Aren't Ottoman and coffee tables supposed to have at least one flat surface?"

There was a sudden pause of silence and the two of them looked at each other before looking back at Máximo, who wasn't done yet. "Berwald," Máximo spoke slowly. "You're also telling me that you don't know of the break-in... but you don't know about Tino either? The missing boat?" As Máximo said it he realized why nothing sounded right. Both of them were just too calm.

Máximo spied Berwald's phone resting in the phone holder, and he could see the small outline of Kiku's phone in his pants pocket. There's no way that they couldn't know. Berwald showed some type of emotion as he suddenly gripped the steering wheel a little tighter and the air turned tense.

There was another moment of silence.

"Fine." Kiku sighed slowly. "You caught us, Officer Machado."

Máximo tilted his chin up at Kiku in question, while he could see Berwald giving Kiku the side-eye.

"You see...Berwald and I... we're having an affair."

Máximo made a sound like he just swallowed a bug. That's not something he expected.

Kiku sighed lowly. "Yes, we didn't want it to come to light. Small town gossip and all, but it's the truth. That's not my shipment. It's someone else's. Please, Officer... you can't tell anybody! If word got out... we'd both be ruined."

Berwald had a dangerous aura about him at that moment and it made Máximo shudder. Still, Máximo kept himself professional as he was trying to process the bombshell that was just dropped on him. Máximo found himself open and closing his mouth a couple of times before just standing there, bewildered. "...Alright."

"Yes... we heard about the boat through our phones and Berwald-san was going to drop me off at home so we could go to the docks separately and nobody would be the wiser," Kiku explained, not once letting his emotionless facade slip.

"That's-" Máximo let out a whistle. "-That's insane, I won't lie. How?- No, never mind. I don't want to know... just... do what you two need to do then... and uh... if I can be bold. Stop this affair before it turns into a mess, Berwald. Because I can tell you: The moment you and Tino divorce Eduard will be all over Tino. I don't think you want that." With that final word of advice, Máximo decided to leave the two. What happens next will be up to them.

"You think you know someone." He couldn't help but shake his head as he kept on walking to his car. He turned around to get one last look as the van started to take off and just gave his head another shake. "Insane." He commented as he got into his cop car.

"Well, you didn't arrest anyone. So, I assume it was Berwald?" Emma immediately asked as Máximo started to clip his seatbelt in.

"Yep, it was him and Kiku Honda to boot."

Emma tilted her head in question. "Why would they be together?"

"Well, you aren't going to believe it..."

Máximo had only just started driving the opposite way from the van when Emma spoke up. Emma was gnawing on the edge of her thumb as she sat there contemplating all Máximo had just told her.

"You're right. I don't believe it. This is actually raising more questions for me. One: If there's one good thing about Andersen it's that he never shuts up about his family. Berwald is absolutely in love with Tino. Andersen once said: 'If Berwald would have to choose between hurting Tino and cutting off a finger, he'd choose the finger every time.'"

Máximo snorted as Emma had done it while mocking Andersen's voice. "Spot on," Máximo smirked before turning serious. "Although you make a good point, there's an argument here that you personally don't know Berwald."

"True... but I still see a major hole in their story."

"Which is?"

"Where were they coming from?"

"Well, Berwald was dropping Kiku off at home-"

"Yes, so was Berwald home during the invasion?"

Máximo opened his mouth but swiftly shut it. He never asked, honestly the shock of the news made him forget. "Maybe they were out and about?"

"But they don't want anybody knowing they're together?"

Once again Máximo opened his mouth just promptly shut it. "I mean-"

"Moreover: What was in the back of his van? You and I both saw the outline of a person. Did you just forget that?"

"..."

"I think they said that to shock you and it *worked*, Máxi," Emma told him in a stern voice. "Turn the car around." She suddenly ordered. "We might be able to catch them."

Máximo nodded and obeyed just as quickly. Máximo pulled the car into a driveway to turn it around. Once he did so he immediately picked up the speed in order to catch them. "I can't believe I fell for it!"

"You can't blame yourself too badly. I'm sure if the situation were reversed I would have fallen for it as well."

"Yeah well, it doesn't make it any less irritating."

"Hindsight is twenty-twenty."

"You're telling me!"

Tino kept a close eye on the children, it wasn't easy watching twenty odd little children, but he was managing. Thank goodness for Feliks's falcon-like eyes. Still, it didn't put his mind at ease, if anything his anxiety was taking a spike for the worst. They were going *way* farther out than he anticipated. They were so far out that he couldn't see the shore let alone the town! Tino figured they were just going to be a little way out, not miles out.

Still, Tino kept his demeanor calm, even if on the inside he was on the verge of a panic attack. He kept looking at Yao, who had yet to say a single thing to them or the children. The boat had actually stopped and then the anchor fell, keeping them in place, so why hasn't Yao moved?

"-And surely, Mr. Tino could fill us in on this piece of machinery!" Feliks suddenly spoke up making Tino look at him. The children were all crowding around what seemed to be a pulley used to cast out the net.

"Ah, yes. This, children, is what the fishermen use to cast their net out. They leave the net in the water for the fishes to swim in and then they'll pull it back up-" A little hand shot up in the air. "Yes, Heracles?"

"Would cats like the net?-"

"-That's a dumb question to ask!" Little Sadik suddenly yelled. Sadik was not one of Tino's students, but rather one of Feliks's. Still, Tino knew of Sadik and his reputation with Heracles rather well. They got along as well as cats and dogs to put it bluntly.

"-You're a dumb question!"

"That doesn't even make sense!"

"Boys, boys, calm down." Tino sighed and pressed his hand to his forehead. "Sadik, there are no dumb questions, and Heracles, I can't answer that."

"That's teacher slang for 'dumb question'." Sadik suddenly stuck his tongue out at Heracles.

"I think cats would like the net!" Little Feliciano piped up. "The net smells like fish and cats *love* fish!"

Heracles beamed at that. "Right! You get it! See, it's not a dumb question!" He reared around and sneered at Sadik, who just started to laugh.

"Everyone knows Feliciano is the dumbest kid in class-"

Ludwig squared up instantly. "You want to say that to my face!" Ludwig raised his fists in a threatening way.

Sadik was never one to back down from a fight. "Bring it! Smellschmit!"

"That's it!"

A sharp trill cut through the air as Tino used his forefinger and thumb to whistle loud enough to silence the children. It worked and all parties backed off in an instant.

Tino already had the punishment planned "Sadik, Ludwig, timeout." Tino instantly ordered and pointed to the bench that was within eyeshot. He knew he was teaching fifth grade, not first, but it was going to have to work. "Five minutes-ah! No buts!" Tino was firm when he saw Sadik open his mouth. Ludwig crossed his arms but did as he was told.

"Feliks, if you would?"

"Of course." Feliks sighed and followed the boys. "You heard the man, five minutes."

"It's your fault-" Sadik whispered to Ludwig as they walked.

"None of that. I *will* tack on extra time." Feliks ordered in a stern voice before they finally left earshot.

Tino snorted as he watched them go and crossed his arms over his chest. Tino suddenly felt a tug on his sleeve and he looked down to see Elise. "What's up, sweetie?" Tino asked as he got down on one knee so he was eye level with her. He knew Elise, and he knew she was rather quiet, so he wanted to be sure that he could hear her.

"I don't want to be rude...but when are we going back to the docks, Mr. Tino? I don't like the ocean."

Tino frowned. "That... is a good question." They spent so long getting to this location and when he looked at his watch he realized they actually should be getting back to the shore shortly if they wanted to make it to the buses. "I guess that's something I should be asking Mr. Yao..." Tino turned his head towards where Yao should be standing-

But to Tino's horror Yao wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Tino felt his heart drop from his chest and into his stomach as he frantically looked for Yao. The tips of his fingers went numb and Tino tried to keep his emotions from showing. The last thing he wanted was to scare the children. "Whenever I get the chance that is..." Tino settled on saying as he tried to sound as natural as possible.

As much as Tino wanted to explore and see where Yao had run off to, he couldn't just leave the children alone. He needed Feliks but had to wait. So, Tino had to calmly keep teaching. He kept looking over to see if maybe Yao had just taken a restroom break, but he hadn't returned.

"-This is a... uh..." Tino felt out of his element as he looked at the instrument in front of him. Yao should be the one explaining the equipment... "If I'm being honest, students, I don't know." Tino accepted defeat and he looked at his watch. Five minutes came and went, but judging by the fact that Ludwig was now off the bench and facing a corner of the boat, Feliks had to tack on extra time.

Feliks was leaning his back on a railing, arms crossed, as he watched both boys dutifully. The question is, how much time did he have to give?

Tino looked from his watch and frowned when he still hadn't spotted Yao. Unless Yao was sick, his sudden absence made no sense.

Call it parental instinct or a teacher sense, but Tino got the feeling that something bad was happening, so he turned his head towards the students-

Just in time to see Feliciano climbing up on the railing!

Tino felt bad for pushing some of the other kids out of the way. "Feliciano!" In a blind mad grab, Tino grabbed Feliciano by the back of his dress and yanked him back. "What did we tell you about climbing!?"

Feliciano pouted once both feet were on the ship. "Don't do it..." Feliciano guiltily told Tino.

"Right, now consider this a warning, if I see you do something that reckless again I *will* tell Roderich and Eliza. Timeout. Go." Tino didn't want to add Feliciano to time out as it'll take up Feliks's time, but the boy had to have some sort of punishment. Tino pointed to where Sadik and Ludwig were and Feliciano deflated.

"I just wanted to see-"

"-Go, before I make it ten minutes."

Feliciano grumbled something in Italian but complied and retreated with his head low. A couple of kids snickered at him as he went. Tino gave them all a look and the kids went quiet. Feliciano was directed to another corner of the ship by Feliks and away from Ludwig.

"Now, where were we?"

"You didn't know what that thing was!" A child, Ravis, if Tino had to guess. Filled him in.

"Yes! I don't know what it does, but judging by how it looks, I'd say it'd have to be a pulley of sorts..."

Ludwig and Sadik were out of timeout first. They silently joined in with the other children, but Feliciano still had yet to return. Tino had looked over his shoulder at one point to see

what was taking so long and he saw Feliciano talking with Feliks. Feliks was down on one knee listening to what Feliciano had to say.

Not surprising really, seeing how close Feliks was to Eliza, it was almost natural for the man to pry and see why Feliciano had done what he did.

"Mr. Tino?" A small tug on the sleeve caught his attention and once again he saw Elise.

"Yes, dear?" He asked her.

Elise started to slightly shake a little in her place. "I... I'm hungry." She finally spoke. "When can we have lunch?"

"Yeah! I'm starving, when *is* lunch?!" Feliciano suddenly yelled loudly that it made Tino jump as he wasn't expecting it. That did it though, the mention of food caused a loud chorus of complaining and hungry students.

Tino instantly looked at the watch on his wrist. It was way past noon, almost one at this point. If everything would have gone to schedule they should actually be boarding the bus by now and that would take them to a place to eat. Because lunch would have been provided it seemed no student had packed a lunch for themselves.

Feliks walked up to Tino and the two of them shared a look. Feliks instantly picked up that something was wrong and he clapped his hands. "Okay children. We're going to take a little five-minute break from learning! Feel free to talk to one another. But stay *away* from the railings and equipment! Mr. Tino and I will be watching you guys from a distance. Understand?"

The children said they did and instantly turned to talk to one another. Tino's wrist was grabbed as Feliks started marching him away from the students. "Talk to me. What's going on?" Feliks asked in a small tone as they continued to walk.

"Yao is gone."

"What?!" Feliks whispered in shock as he grasped onto Tino's wrist tighter. He saw Feliks go to turn his head and look over to where Yao should be, but Tino quickly stopped him.

"Don't look. Don't let the kids see that something might be wrong. The last thing we need is panic. And before you ask, no, Yao isn't in the bathroom. It's been over thirty minutes."

Feliks frowned but lowered his head. "What are we going to do? They're going to know something is wrong."

"They don't have to. I just need you to keep them distracted. Let me look around for Yao. He might still be on the boat."

"What if he's not?"

"... then... I'll figure it out," Tino told Feliks. "Just keep them busy, please."

"Well... you were a marine..." Feliks grumbled but nodded. "Okay, what should I tell them if they ask about you?"

"...I got seasick."

"Understood. Go."

With that Tino briskly walked away from the children while Feliks walked towards them calling out: "Times up! Gather around!"

It didn't take long for Tino to circle the outside of the boat in his search for Yao. Tino was sure he got his answer to Yao's disappearance when he noted that the only lifeboat was missing. "Great," Tino grunted so that plan was thrown out if it had to go down to it.

Tino made his way up for the controls and steering wheel. This was blocked off by a door. A locked one at that. Tino could see inside as it was surrounded by windows and it was empty as empty could be. He could also see inside the small square window that was attached to the door. He knew what he had to do.

So, Tino looked around to make sure nobody could see him. Once he was sure the coast was clear, Tino looked around and saw his weapon of choice. A fire extinguisher just next to the door. "Thank you." He grabbed the heavy extinguisher and with no remorse he used the butt of the extinguisher to ram into the glass.

It didn't work the first time, in fact, he didn't even make a crack. So, he tried again, this time with more force. The glass wobbled but didn't give. Tino frowned a little at this but he wasn't going to let some stupid glass get into his way. So, with as much force as he could possibly muster up, Tino raised the fire extinguisher and bashed down against the glass. That did it.

The glass shattered so loudly that Tino almost feared the students heard it. After a few seconds of him just standing there with his eyes closed, fearing the worst. He figured he was in the clear. He opened his eyes and silently went for the door. He Let the extinguisher fall to the ground with a thud. The glass crunched violently under his feet with each step he took. It was almost satisfying for him to hear.

Tino got to the shattered window and flicked some of the glass out of his way. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck. The glass fell to the ground and broke some more upon impact. Once he was sure most of the glass was out of his way, Tino, unfortunately, couldn't fit his whole body in, he couldn't even fit his head through the window, but he could fit his arm. So, in his arm snaked and he went straight for the lock.

His fingers just hardly grazed against the turned lock on the door. Tino cursed at the length of his arms and tried to reach as far as possible. He stood on his toes and felt the under of his arm dig uncomfortably into the window pane at this. "*Perkele*," he cursed under his breath. He could feel the lock but it was *just* out of his reach. Tino eventually had to pull his arm out.

With a hiss of pain, Tino rubbed under his arm where the pane was digging into and made an uncomfortable face. He needed a new plan. He could try his other arm, but he was sure that wouldn't get him anywhere. So, he looked for something around that could help him out. He

was hoping for something long and thin, like a coat hanger, just something that he could use to push the lock.

*'Think Tino...' He told himself as he paced back and forth a bit. 'Think back to **those** days. Before you were a marine... the days that would have ended in prison otherwise.'* Tino thought to himself. He was a changed man and not as wild as he used to be, the Marines (and Berwald) made sure of that. Still, he was going to have to dip into his darkened past if he wanted to see what's going on.

Tino shut his eyes and lowered his head. Concentrating on what he would do if he were ten or fifteen years younger. What would his younger self do in this situation?

'There's no lock if there's no doorknob.' Tino opened his eyes and snatched the extinguisher off of the ground. He raised the extinguisher up and over his head and bashed it down against the doorknob. It came clean off in one hit. The moment it was free, Tino kicked the door in. It nearly fell off of its hinges at such a violent swing. Thankfully, Tino managed to stop the door before it came crashing back at him.

"Whoo!- oops." Tino, at first, cried out in exhilaration, before silencing himself before the children heard. It was a trip that made Tino's blood pump with excitement, but it was over now and he quickly put himself in back check. "Okay." he whispered and immediately walked over to the dashboard.

He recognized the wheel, accelerator, and brake.

The rest of the buttons were a mystery to him.

Tino took a small look around the cabin in hopes of finding something useful. He found a first-aid kit hidden away under the seat and on top of the box was a bright orange flare gun. He leaned down and picked the small gun up. He popped the barrel out and saw two shots. With expert hands he popped the barrel back in and shoved the gun into his slacks. Just in case.

He stood there for a few moments trying to think of his next course of action.

Tino saw a small monitor next to the wheel, and if he had to guess it was a GPS that was turned off, because of course it was. He took a seat and tapped it to turn it on. It didn't turn on, after pressing all of the buttons on the thing it still didn't turn on. So, Tino followed the cords to see if it was maybe unplugged.

No, it was worse than that. Tino was uneasy before, but when he saw that the cord was *cut* he almost felt terrified and it doubled when he realized the radio cord had also been cut. All outside communication was terminated.

What had they unknowingly walked into?

The plan was simple. As Peter had been into Marius's home they had figured that Marius had led the boat there. It only made sense if he was trying to kill all these children for him to lead

them to him. Work smarter not harder as they say. So, it was decided that they would have to take Kiku's boat to the children in an attempt to help.

They couldn't take Gilbert's car. There was no way his tiny car could haul Kiku's boat, so they had to take Berwald's work van. There were no seats in the back of the van and in the end that's what helped them when they got stopped by the police. That and the tarp and blankets.

It was Gilbert's fast thinking that got them out of that situation and back on the road.

The next part of the plan was supposed to be simple. As the docks were out of the question, Kiku was going to hitch his boat to the back of the van and Berwald was just going to have to drive on the beach and dock the boat there for them.

The boat was just a little skiff boat used for personal fishing. There was no way for it to fit all seven of them. So, it was decided amongst the brothers that, because little lives were on the line, they wouldn't be on the boat.

They would be swimming next to it.

It really didn't take long for Berwald to get the boat into the water, Kiku and Gilbert both kept it still while they waited for Berwald to park and return. While they did that, Matthew, Liam, Alfred, and Peter were slowly getting undressed. Kiku was nice enough to provide them with plastic bags to put their clothes in. They all handed the bags to Kiku, who placed them on his boat.

By the time Berwald had made his way back Liam and Alfred were already in the water. Matthew was being polite and waiting for Peter, who seemed to be waiting for Berwald. Matthew hung back, awkwardly standing in his boxers, while he let Peter talk to Berwald.

"You promise you won't freak out?" Peter had innocently asked as he took Berwald's hand into his own.

Berwald blinked before his features softened ever so slightly. "I won't freak out." He promised in a soft voice as he patted Peter on the head.

Peter looked relieved before he took off like a rocket for the water. He ran with his arms out and just dive bombed right into the ocean. He splashed both Alfred and Liam causing both of them to yell out in alarm. There was a flash of green before Peter came back up. He immediately started to splash around with his tail.

Berwald looked shocked for a moment before regaining himself and going for the boat. He had to go into waist deep water and awkwardly climb up the boat with the help of Gilbert and Kiku.

"Mattie! C'mon!" Liam whistled sharply.

Matthew chuckled a little and started for the ocean. "I'm coming!" He jogged up the shoreline, ready to jump when-

"-Freeze."

Matthew did just that when he heard Máximo's voice. His blood turned ice cold. "Get your hands up." Máximo's voice was hard, but slightly shaking. Matthew slowly lifted his hands up just slightly.

"Máxi-" Gilbert was the one to speak from Kiku's boat.

"Why doesn't it surprise me you're involved Gilbert?" Máximo suddenly asked. "Just when I thought that maybe I could begin to trust you."

"Just hear us out!" Gilbert snarled.

"Save it." Emma barked and marched up to the shoreline. "Back-up is on its way. So you six just stay right where you are."

Before Matthew knew it one of his arms was harshly grabbed and he hissed out when Máximo forced his hands behind his back. "I see you found your brothers, Matthew." Máximo lightly hissed in Matthew's ear.

"Yeah... I did- ow..." Matthew hissed again when something hard and cold was *slapped* on his wrist. He found out what handcuffs did and he realized he didn't like it.

"-You know, you almost had me fooled. Almost." Máximo laughed. "Good thing Emma was with me otherwise who knows what would have happened."

"You think we're going after the children?" Matthew asked once Máximo's words sunk in.

"...As a cop? Yes."

"How about as Máximo?" Matthew challenged as he turned around. "The man who was nice enough to take me when I was vulnerable?"

"..." Máximo's mouth twitched a little and he scratched his face. "He doesn't quite know what to think yet. I know something is going on, Matthew. Are you a part of it? Or are you fighting it, is the question."

"Máximo, please, you just need to trust me." Matthew tried to beg. "I promise, we're not trying to hurt those children. We're trying to find them, just like the rest of you."

"How can I believe that when you clearly can't trust me."

"I trust you. I really, honestly, do. Máximo. You've done more for me than I can even fathom. It's... the others, I'm finding hard to trust right now."

"My coworkers?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Matthew couldn't answer. He couldn't answer for a handful of reasons, the biggest one being Emma. Was that actually Emma? Or was that Marius?

Was he even talking to Máximo right now? It was all so muddled and confusing.

"C'mon, asshat!" Gilbert angrily snarled from the boat. "My baby brother is on that ship! His husband is on that ship!-" Gilbert pointed to Berwald. "Do you really think we're going to hurt the children?!"

"-Okay... you have a good point there, Beilschmidt, so what was your goal exactly? Wander the ocean until you possibly find them?" Emma suddenly asked as she approached the shoreline. She had her arms over her chest, which was better than her having her hand on her gun. "That's foolish, also reckless if you're really bringing-... You must be Peter?" She crouched down and in a softer tone addressed Peter non threateningly. Peter responded by ducking down so low in the water so that only his eyes and the top of his head was visible. "Aren't you adorable?"

Alfred and Liam stayed by Peter's side and just watched Emma carefully. Because of this Emma looked from Liam to Alfred. "Regardless..." Emma switched back as she looked back over to the boat. "What was your plan here?"

"That's none of your business." Liam was the one to, bluntly, respond to her question. "Just know that we aren't the one you should be after-"

"Marius is-." Hearing Máximo mention Marius made Matthew shiver in fear. "-Right?" Máximo marched Matthew forward suddenly. Matthew gasped and stopped just before the tide could hit his feet.

Liam's eyes hardened and his eyebrows furrowed. "You don't want to get involved with our matters. So, just let my brother go and drop it now. I promise you, if you let us go we will bring the children back safely and you won't have to worry about it or us ever again."

"Officers, please." Kiku chimed in. "Listen to what he has to say. It's not worth getting involved. We can deal with it-"

"You're all civilians!" Emma hissed between her teeth. "Asking us to turn a blind eye to this? And to whoever this 'Marius' is is unacceptable! Not only that, but for you guys to know where these children are is just cruel to the parents and coast guard- No. I've heard enough. Off the boat and out of the water. Now." Emma huffed and unclipped her walkie talkie from her shoulder, ready to report them-

Then... things just happened so fast that Matthew couldn't process it all.

Kiku yelled out in alarm, and next thing Matthew knew he was suddenly pushed.

The problem arose when Matthew lost his balance and fell right into the water. He was too close to the shore and with his hands cuffed behind his back he couldn't swim. So, his horror grew when Arthur's magic kicked in and before he knew it his legs fused back together to form his tail while he was still on the shore.

Matthew turned his head to stare at Máximo and Emma. He expected them to be staring at him in complete and utter shock, but that wasn't the case. As Máximo was currently on the ground, Tolys was on top of him, his hands wrapped tightly around Máximo's neck.

Something told Matthew that Máximo wasn't Tolys's original target.

Emma was quick to action though. She grabbed Tolys by both of his arms and pulled him back with all of her tiny might. This caused Tolys to let go of Máximo, which was great, but unfortunately this caused him to focus on Emma instead. In one powerful swing of his arm, Tolys smacked Emma. Not with his hand but with his arm. She was thrown back in an instant.

Tolys then turned his gaze on Matthew. Now, Matthew never met Tolys, but Matthew was sure that Tolys didn't have the same blood red eyes that Marius has.

Matthew felt stuck in place. He couldn't swim, he'd sink without his hands to help him, not only that but being this close to the shore, there's no way he'd make it to the deep end, still that didn't stop him from trying to wiggle pitifully into the water.

A bucket was tossed at Tolys's head, and it not only hit him dead on, but it also landed perfectly on his head. That was when Matthew heard the splash, but before he could turn his head there was a flash and Gilbert instantly had an arm around Tolys's neck, while using his other arm to twist Tolys's right arm behind his back.

That was when Emma came to Gilbert's aid. All it took was one hit from her baton and Tolys went down. Emma chose to strike the bucket over Tolys's head, no doubt causing it to reverberate and vibrate so intensely that, if the hit to the back of the head wasn't enough, it alone caused Tolys's knees to give out.

Gilbert let go of Tolys in an instant, Tolys went down, screaming as he tried to clutch at his head in desperation. It almost made Matthew feel bad for him. And it made Matthew wonder if maybe, just maybe, that was what Tolys needed to come back.

Emma planted her foot on Tolys's back, successfully kicking him to the ground on his stomach.

"You okay, Máxi?" Gilbert walked away to let Emma deal with Tolys alone. Which was fine as she was just as swift to start putting him in cuffs.

Matthew was so enthralled in what he was seeing he failed to notice Liam. It was only when there was a sudden and impatient tug on the cuffs did he realize what was happening. "Not even you are strong enough to break these." Matthew found himself whispering to his brother.

"I'm afraid you're right..." He heard Liam sigh in annoyance.

"M-...Matthew?" He heard Máximo actually gasp out in slight shock. This made Matthew look away from Liam, who, like him, was sitting in the shallows. This meant that just like Matthew, all of Liam was visible for all to see.

"Sorry, Birdie-" Gilbert made an uncomfortable face. "I tried to keep him distracted."

"Not your fault, Gil. I guess... It's best in the end?" Matthew found himself sighing in defeat. Máximo looked like he might pass out as he just stared intensely at Matthew's tail. A hand clamped over his mouth in shock. "Look, Máximo, I'm sorry. I really am, I hated having to lie to you, but you have to understand why I did it!"

"This...makes *so* much sense... and *no sense* at the same time!" Máximo suddenly exploded as he shut his eyes. "You knew nothing! Absolutely nothing, you didn't even know how to walk! When you and Liam were talking in the interrogation room you said things like: 'He's on the land' or you'd just call us 'humans'. Ivan called it that something was wrong with you two and I opted to ignore it: Like an idiot!" Máximo went on a rant.

Emma was watching Matthew and his brother, he could see this, but she decided it'd be best if she stayed out of it and focused on taking the bucket off of Tolys's head. A wise choice.

"But... the ship? Your brothers?" Máximo pointed to Alfred and Peter. Peter had stuck closer to Berwald and Kiku's boat and because of this his confusion was more apparent.

"It's a long story, Máximo. One that-"

"-That we don't have the time to repeat right now." Liam hissed suddenly. "Listen, and listen well! We have an inkling where that boat may be! Yes, Marius is one of us! Marius is planning on *murdering* those children on that boat, do you understand!? We're trying to stop him and you're wasting our time!"

Matthew blinked in surprise when suddenly in a flash of green his hands were freed from behind his back. The cuffs were still attached to his wrists but the middle was broken-no...charred.

It took all but three seconds for it to sink in for not just Matthew, but Alfred, and Peter as well. They all shouted at once: "You have magic!?"

"Of course I have magic, you ding-a-lings! You act like Arthur didn't raise me! Now, enough asking questions! We have children to save!" With that shout of authority Liam dipped under the water and vanished from sight.

"Sorry, Máxi, I hope you understand why I have to do this!" Gilbert yelled as he darted from the shore and jumped onto Kiku's skiff boat. That's all Kiku needed to finally start the engine. Peter and Alfred both went under.

"I hope you'll forgive me for lying to you and... everyone else." Matthew almost whispered to Máximo. Matthew was ready to rush off and swim away.

"Wait!" Máximo's bark made Matthew stop for just a second.

"Máxi-" Matthew tried to argue, but suddenly his wrist was grabbed and before he knew it Máximo was unlocking the cuff around his wrist.

"These might slow you down." Máximo grunted out as he then reached over to unlock Matthew's other cuff. "Just... get those kids back safely, okay?"

Matthew nodded, first slowly then a little more faster and noticeable. "We will!"

"Birdie! C'mon!" Gilbert yelled and when Matthew looked back he saw the boat was leaving.

"Thank you, Máximo, for everything. Oh!... Here." Matthew paused and took the glasses off of his face and carefully folded them.

"Keep 'em. You need them."

"Not in the water."

"Matt-"

"Just-" Matthew, being sly, tucked the glasses into Máximo's shirt pocket. "-Keep them safe for when I come back." And with that Matthew took off before Máximo could stop him or give him his glasses back.

"Took you long enough." Liam grunted once Matthew was able to catch up with them.

"Sorry, just had to do something before I left."

"Hm."

"So, Liam-" Alfred slyly swam under Liam so he could be on Liam's right. "When exactly were you going to show us that you had magic?"

"Yeah! We had no clue!" Peter yelled.

Liam rolled his eyes. "Focus on leading the way, Peter. But if you three must know, I've always had magic. I just... don't like to use it."

"Why not! Magic is cool!" Peter once again yelled at Liam.

"Peter!"

"Yeah, yeah, focus on leading the way..."

"... Magic isn't 'cool'. At least not to me. Magic is part of the reason why Dad, Lukas, and Marius stopped being friends. Magic is possibly what caused Marius to go crazy and power hungry. I told dad after what happened with Petru... I don't want to focus on my magical abilities. I'd rather focus more on my physical strength if possible. Dad didn't want that. So, we had a compromise. I am to learn the basics and will only use my magic if there is no other option." Liam explained to them as they swam along.

Alfred and Matthew shared a look before nodding. "It makes sense." Matthew was the one to say it.

"Besides, I'm not comfortable with magic around dad... not after how he cursed Petru.." This sudden addition caused the twins to look at each other once again before focusing back at Liam.

Alfred spoke next. "Any particular reason why?"

"... I never told you guys *how* dad cursed Petru, did I?"

They both shook their heads and spoke in unison. "No."

"-I just assumed dad made him like...forever sick." Alfred mumbled.

Then Matthew joined in. "-I figured he was ill."

"You're both not wrong. Sickness, I do feel, is part of it. However; there's way more to it. Dad...I told you guys that dad took his anger out on Petru, right-?" Liam didn't wait for an answer as he just continued. "-Well... you see, Dad was growing wary of Marius and had a back up... an ultimatum if you would."

"What was it?" Alfred asked in a soft voice.

Liam started to ramble a bit. "Dad had planned this for Marius, and for reasons I will never understand he used it against Petru."

It was Peter that yelled in frustration. "What did he do!?"

"...He stripped Petru of his magic."

Late Afternoon

"Tino-like- what are we going to do?!" Feliks panic whispered to Tino, he had every right to be upset as he angrily kicked a wall in frustration. He paused. "Did anyone see that?" He asked after a second. Tino looked over at the children.

"No."

"Urg!" Feliks struck the wall with his foot again once he knew he could get away with it. "The bastard left us to die-"

"-Don't think like that, Feliks. We need to be strong for the children's sake."

"Okay, okay, but Tino, we have no food-" Feliks started to count off on his fingers. "-No drinkable water, we're stuck in the middle of the ocean, and we're caring for children that aren't ours. That's scary enough in a school, but this... this is nightmare fuel." Feliks hissed between his teeth. "That and the kids have to know something is up by now."

"If we tell them they'll panic. I don't know about you, but twenty little panicking ten-year-olds will *not* make this situation any better."

Feliks angrily pursed his lips to the side as he knew Tino had a point there. "You have experience, can't you just drive us out of here?"

"One: Marine, not Navy. Two: Even if I did. The GPS is cut as well as the radio. There's only so much gas, Feliks. The ocean is massive. One wrong turn and we're... in the same situation, only just slightly to the left."

"Your sarcasm is noted." Feliks huffed.

"Nevertheless: Our best bet is to just stay here, hopefully by now somebody has to know something is up."

"Speaking of which: What time is it?"

Tino glanced at his watch. "Nearly two. Jesus Christ..."

Feliks looked back over at the students who were talking amongst themselves. Some looked nervous, while others didn't see anything wrong. "I just wish we would have told the students to pack a lunch."

"I wish I would have told the principal to 'fuck off' when he told me the field trip changed."

Feliks sighed. "Same."

Tino started to fan himself as the sun was right on them and the boat. "We should move the kids. Somewhere safer, away from the equipment and railings. I already caught Feliciano trying to climb on the railings."

"Agreed. The kids need to be away somewhere safer, but where? The captain quarters is covered in glass, and also if they see the GPS and radio-"

"The hull. We'll put 'em in the hull. That way they're also out of the sun. We didn't bring any sunscreen, don't forget that."

"The hull... I see your point, we can lie and say it's something else we're learning... I guess."

"Yeah, well I want them there for another reason. In case help doesn't come tonight they're going to need a place to sleep. The hull is cool and safest for that... but god help us if we get caught in a storm."

"Tino... you know we can't keep this lie up much longer."

Tino frowned as he pulled at his collar. "I know. Let's get the kids to the hull. We'll take half-hour shifts coming up and keeping a lookout for help." Tino pulled out his phone ready to make a timer, Feliks did the same.

Tino couldn't get past his lock screen. He just stared at the picture. It was one of the few pictures Tino managed to get him, Sven, and Berwald all in together. His hands started to shake slightly and he had to force them to still before it was noticed by Feliks. The idea of him dying at sea... was not a pleasant one. It also didn't help when he thought about what would happen if something horrible did happen to the students.

All those parents mourning their young ones who barely got to live...

A pain he knew all too well.

'Like I said this morning. No parent will feel as I do. I will do what it takes to have them survive. I have to.' Tino set his timer shortly after Feliks had set his. "I'll take the first shift."

"Lukas, maybe this time attack like you mean it?"

"Screw you." Lukas's lack of practice was showing and he was already exhausted. He was panting on the floor, but he still had enough energy to raise his right hand and gave Arthur the finger.

Arthur paused before letting out a laugh he tried to suppress. "Cute." He grinned in response. Before sighing and looking at the red barrier that stood between them and the children. Emil was awake now and glad to see Lukas and Arthur, however, it seemed he couldn't hear them.

Emil had tried to ram himself in the barrier a couple of times in a hopeless attempt to get to his guardian. Eventually, upon seeing that Arthur and Lukas were trying to tear the barrier down, he stopped and resided in a corner. Arthur had a sharp eye out and noticed that Emil was holding onto another tiny hand. No doubt, that hand belonged to Petru. It made Arthur's heart race just thinking about it.

They were so close.

"You know... if Emil were younger, I think he would have killed Petru for food by now." Arthur decided to joke a bit to lighten the mood.

Lukas harrumphed at that and put his hands on his hips. "Then Marius would kill us and the rest of the ocean life on top of it. Also, Emil wasn't a cannibal and he wasn't always blood-hungry-"

"-Didn't you once tell me he tried to fight an octopus?"

"He was scrappy... also, don't give me that. If I remember correctly, you had to physically pull Liam off of an Anglerfish."

"Hey, that's different-..." Arthur raised his finger, opened his mouth, shut it again, and then just paused entirely. Lukas crossed his arms, patiently waiting. "If memory serves right ... he said the fish was ugly."

Lukas just shook his head before glancing inside the cave. He looked inside at Emil who was staring intensely at them. Petru's hand held tightly in his. They couldn't see Petru. "Do you think Marius ever had to pry Petru off of a dangerous sea creature?"

Arthur scoffed. "No, because Marius would have turned the creature to dust before it attacked."

"..."

"...Also... I doubt. Petru was young when the whole ordeal happened." Arthur grumbled. Lukas looked over at Arthur. Arthur was gripping his own right arm with his left hand. Arthur tightened the grip so he was digging his nails into his arm. "It never should have come to this..."

"So... why did it?" Lukas asked the question he's been wanting to ask for years now. "Why Petru?"

Arthur bit his lip and Lukas could start to see scratches forming where Arthur was clutching. "I... I don't *know*. I was so-so *angry*. I just wanted Marius to feel the same pain I was feeling at the time."

"...I know the feeling. When Marius and I had our big blowout, he had accidentally hit Emil and I just lost all sort of control. Petru tried to stop me and for a moment, for just a moment I thought about attacking him along with Marius." Lukas shook his head. "But, I'll repeat what I told you before. Petru was just a child and you punished him for Marius's wrongdoing."

"You don't think I know that?" Arthur whispered. "I'm trying to fix this mess I created. Okay?"

Lukas frowned. For a moment they stood side by side and just stared into the barrier. Then Lukas reached over and lightly touched Arthur's shoulder. Arthur stiffened and looked at him. "...Together. We'll clean this mess up together."

"-You mean-"

"With how crazy Marius has gotten, with how out of touch with reality he's becoming and the lengths he's willing to go. I can't afford to stay hidden. Not just for my sake."

Arthur reached over and gripped Lukas's shoulder. "So, attacking this thing isn't working." Arthur gestured towards the barrier. "I'm out of ideas."

"...It's not invincible. This much we know. This magic is strong, but it can crack if under enough pressure. Attacking causes it to crack, but it heals just as quickly..." Lukas rubbed his chin. "Marius wanted this, obviously, he wanted it to be resilient to almost any type of attack. paranoia, no doubt."

"Only the paranoid survive," Arthur grumbled.

"... Yes, but regardless. We have to *think*, Arthur. How can the two of us break this barrier down?" Lukas finally let go of Arthur's shoulder and swam up the barrier. Lukas touched the barrier. It was warm beneath his fingertips. There to keep the children in, safe, and secure.

Lukas shut his eyes and he could feel Marius's magic vibrate under his fingertips. Lukas focused on how the barrier felt beneath his fingertips. The barrier almost felt like it was ebbing and flowing, like the sea. In a strange way, it almost felt like it was pulsating. *'Maybe how it heals itself so fast?'* Lukas thought. *'It rapidly moves in order to keep itself up and strong... so... maybe...'*

"What are you thinking, mate?"

Lukas bit back an easy joke on the word 'mate' and instead focused back around to Arthur. "The barrier. It's constantly moving."

"Hm..." Arthur hummed in thought and swam up right next to Lukas. "May I?"

"It's not my barrier." Lukas dryly commented and Arthur reached over to touch it. Arthur paused for a heartbeat as he shut his eyes, taking in the movement for himself.

"I think it must be healing itself that way."

"You're on the right track." Arthur let go of the barrier and turned to Lukas. "It's healing because that's what Marius intended it to do. As we mentioned, Marius is paranoid with every right to be. The question is if the movement is as you say: and it's healing itself through its movement. Or: It's moving because it's connected to Marius, which could be bad for us." Arthur stared at the ground as he rubbed his chin in thought.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if this barrier goes down, Marius will know it. He'll feel it and that's not something we need right now."

Lukas sighed and let Arthur's word sink in for a few seconds. "Let's say you're right. The barrier goes down and Marius knows...then isn't that good? That'll get Marius away from the boat-"

"Boat?!" Arthur whipped his head around fast as he stared at Lukas. "What boat?"

"You don't know?" Lukas felt shocked for a moment. He had assumed that Arthur had known about Marius's grand plan. Then again, Lukas only figured it out through dumb luck. If Lovino hadn't have told him, he wouldn't have known either. "I have reason to believe that in a desperate attempt to save Petru in any way he can he might be targeting... human children on a fishing boat."

"..." Arthur stared blankly at the floor for a long period of time. His mind trying its hardest to process what Lukas just told him. Until finally he just said: "I knew he was keeping Petru alive through some means, but... to *kill* human children...I...I thought he was just kidnapping them." Arthur shook his head. He put his hand to his mouth. "Liam and I... we've stopped him a handful of times...from taking children off the shore. I just... You're right... I created a monster."

Lukas felt his lips pursed into a thin and tight line. "I... no." Lukas huffed out. "Let's face it. I'm not innocent in this either. I helped create the monster just as well. But, we can't focus on that or the past anymore. Right now we need to break this barrier down. If it catches Marius's attention then it's for the best, right? He'll have to leave the boat alone to check on Petru."

"Yes... Yes! You're right. We'll break the barrier. It's either connected to him or it's not... for once... I pray it is. For those children's sake." Arthur sighed out and squared his shoulders. "I already have an idea."

"Yeah? I'm all ears."

"We're going to still it. Make it stop moving."

"That's possible?"

Arthur nodded. "It's possible between the two of us and it's simple. What we're going to do is just this: Add pressure with magic. Force it to a still, and once it's stilled-"

"-Keep adding pressure, Right? Make it crack on its own?"

Arthur couldn't hide his smile. "Exactly. The more pressure we add with our magic the less it'll be able to fight back." Arthur reached out and touched the barrier with gentle hands.

"But... this comes at a bit of a cost. The more magic we use-"

"The less energy we'll have after it's done."

"I hate to brag, but between the two of us, I've been keeping up with my limits."

Lukas sighed. "Unlike you and Marius I've never had any desire to pass out due to exhaustion. I still don't actually... However, I'm willing to do whatever I have to get Emil and Petru out of there. Yes, my limits aren't as strong or as long as yours. If I pass out just... at least make an attempt to carry me out?"

"That's not an unreasonable request," Arthur commented softly. Lukas came up to the barrier and placed both hands on it. Arthur did the same. "Okay, just focus your magic on the

movement of the barrier."

Lukas nodded and looked at the red barrier. He felt his magic flicker against the barrier. He glanced over at Arthur. Arthur's eyes were glowing and he was pushing just as Lukas was. "A little harder, Lukas," Arthur grunted.

Lukas complied and focused on stilling the barrier. He felt his magic push but it wasn't enough, so he sucked in a deep breath, and along with using more magic he physically pressed his hands harder against the barrier, putting more physical strength behind it, hoping it'd help.

Arthur let out a grunt and was doing the same. "C'mon..." Arthur growled between clenched teeth and Lukas could see him also putting his might behind his magic.

'*There!*' Lukas knew that they were getting somewhere as he felt the barrier stall for just a second before rapidly picking up speed. The barrier was trying to fight against their combined forces.

Lukas knew he was starting to reach his limits, but he couldn't stop now. Not when he knew that they were so close. So, he narrowed his eyes and put even more magic against the barrier. Lukas gritted his teeth and let out a loud growl from his throat. He could feel his magic flare beneath his fingertips- no. His magic was fighting against Marius's barrier, rippling violently against it in fact. It was moving erratically, bashing itself against the barrier in an attempt to still it. Lukas was afraid his teeth were going to break with how hard he was gritting them.

It was then that it happened, it was not what Lukas had expected. At all.

The barrier, in its attempt to keep itself up, was moving so rapidly, so when it finally did still, it literally *cracked* under their weight. At both of their hands, the barrier cracked and from that crack, it started to web, first a small web, only to suddenly violently web out in such a way that it covered the whole of the barrier. Lukas let out a gasp and went back for a moment.

Arthur was looking at it as well, but before the barrier could re-heal itself. Arthur just smacked it dead in the center with his magic. This magical blast was what finally did the barrier in. It shattered like glass, but instead of dangerous shards coming their way, the magic simply fell and dissipated before it even hit the floor.

There was only silence-

"Lukas!"

-For half a second.

Emil threw himself so harshly into Lukas's arms that he caused Lukas to fall back. Together the two of them somersaulted into a hug. The only noise that left Lukas's mouth was a small "Oh!" of surprise.

"I was so scared! I thought he was Andersen! I tried to call for you, but then he grabbed me by my hair-"

"Easy-" Lukas only breathed out as he patted Emil on the back. "It's okay."

While Lukas dealt with Emil, Arthur was cautious as he entered Marius's nest. First and foremost he used his vision to make sure there were no other tricks for them, he could see the traces of the barrier and obvious traces of Marius everywhere. Arthur scowled as something odd caught his eye. He couldn't describe what he was looking at.

It was the form of a merperson, but from what Arthur was seeing with his vision, there were several 'layers' to this person. Arthur got closer to get a better look. Each layer was a different color. The bottom being burgundy, pink, violet, green, light blue, dark blue, and orange on the very top. It was like these colors were all being squished into a tiny body with no room to escape. Any more colors and the person might just explode. There were so many colors that with his vision Arthur honestly couldn't see who this person might be.

It didn't surprise him when he pushed his vision back to see Petru.

'I see now. Lukas was right, for sure. Marius was killing the children for their souls to place into Petru.' Arthur stared down at Petru. He took it all in, the different colored hair, the mismatched skin pigment, the freckles...

"Lukas!"

Arthur whirled around at Emil's yell of alarm.

It seemed Lukas's strain caught up with him. The moment he knew Emil was safe he relaxed and now was passed out on the seafloor. Emil was trying to hold Lukas up from his underarms, but even underwater, Lukas was just too heavy for Emil to hold up. But poor Emil, just now getting his guardian back only to have him collapse, it was hard on the ten-year-old. He was obviously on the verge of a mental break.

"Emil-" Arthur turned and came over and gently pulled him in. "Lukas will be okay. I need you to be strong right now because we aren't out of the woods just yet. I'll carry Lukas. Okay?"

Emil sniffled softly but nodded. "Where are we going?" He asked with a shaky breath. "A hospital?"

"Heh." Arthur couldn't stop his soft laugh. "I wish it were that simple." He patted Emil on the head. "No. Right now we just need to get away. Before Marius comes back."

"Do you want me to carry Petru then?"

If Arthur was tasked with carrying Lukas (Something that won't exactly be easy.) then someone had to carry Petru. It's not that Arthur didn't trust Emil, but he felt that Emil, being just a child, might move Petru a little too much while they were swimming. That and even

though Petru looked underweight Arthur was sure Petru still might be too heavy for Emil to carry.

"No..." Arthur sighed, and as much as he didn't want to involve Lillie in this, he knew it was inevitable now. He knew Lillie was almost desperate to be involved, she always hated being in the shadows, granted she wasn't as in the shadows as Alfred, Matthew, and Peter were, but still. He tried to keep her out of the action.

It was with a heavy heart did he call for Lillie, it only took seconds for her to tumble, yes, *tumble*, down the entrance. She was so excited to help. Arthur simply pointed her in Petru's direction. "Can you hold him?"

Lillie smiled and immediately swam that way. "Of course I can-" She looked at Petru and suddenly swam back like she had been hit. "-Oh!" She squeaked in shock and Arthur saw her put her hands to her mouth. "Poor thing..." Arthur heard her whisper, but she did as she was told and was careful as she tried to find a good angle in which to hold him.

Arthur huffed and stared down at Lukas. "It's almost like we're kids again..." He commented as he awkwardly lifted one of Lukas's arms up.

Emil stood by, watching Arthur's every move. "...Can't you just teleport him? Or Petru for that matter."

"Teleport?" Arthur inquired through another grunt as he pulled Lukas's body up and tried to hold him over his shoulders. It wasn't exactly easy with the water holding Lukas down. This was one of the few times Arthur wished he was on the land.

"That's how Marius got me here," Emil whispered. "He pinned me to the ground and pushed on to my chest. His eyes glowed red and he said 'I might rip you in half if you don't hold still' then next thing I knew I was here."

"Uncle Marius learned how to teleport?" Lillie gasped as she came up. She had Petru in her arms holding him 'bridal style' so to speak. Petru's head tipped back, his mouth agape and eyes closed as he slept.

"It seems to be more than that. He not only learned how to teleport himself but others..." Arthur couldn't help but comment as he managed to finally get Lukas on his back. It was awkward carrying his old friend like this, but Arthur couldn't carry him in any other way. *'The one time I need Liam's strength.'* Arthur thought to himself. "Regardless, I don't know how to teleport myself, let alone others. Although it would be helpful right about now."

If Arthur were on the land he could probably hold Lukas by his legs and keep him hoisted on his back, but because he was in the sea and didn't have two legs, and neither did Lukas, Arthur had to clunkily position Lukas in a way so his arms were over Arthur's shoulders and Lukas could hold on to his arms...like Lukas was a human cape. This meant that Lukas's head was right next to Arthur's ear.

At least Arthur knew Lukas was still alive by his breathing.

"Let's go."

"But where? Whenever Marius gets back he'll immediately know *you* took Petru!" Emil got in front of Arthur instantly. "I don't know exactly what's happening between everyone, I'll admit, but I can safely say that Marius isn't in his right state of mind. He'll turn homicidal! We can't go back to your nest-"

"I'm aware of this, Emil. That's why we're not returning to my nest... We'll have to go somewhere where Marius can't find us."

"And where would that be?" Lillie inquired.

Arthur paused as he thought about it. Really, he only had two options. The first and most obvious one was the surface, but that was also the most dangerous option. If Arthur got caught and arrested then all chances of healing Petru would be thrown away, but it was the safest away from Marius.

There was another place he could go. In the ocean. He'd be away from the police, but still close enough to where if Marius sniffed him out he most likely would be found.

This wasn't an easy choice to make. "That... is a good question."

Gilbert stood at the bow of Kiku's little boat. He hung on to the bar of the overhead cover whilst looking off of the edge of the boat. He was watching Matthew swim. Matthew moved effortlessly, his tail followed him every movement fluidly almost giving off a snake-like impression.

The wild thing was watching Matthew move around his brothers. They all knew how to swim around each other, what was impressive was when Matthew actually swam upside down for a few minutes. When he caught Gilbert watching he smiled before swimming normally. No doubt under Liam's orders. That guy was a real stick in the mud, but if Gilbert had to be honest, with the chaos that is Alfred and Peter, a stick in the mud was what was needed.

Berwald stood just a little ways away from Gilbert, obviously, he was watching them swim as well. Gilbert noted how Berwald would look at his watch nervously every so often.

"Something on your mind, Berry?" Gilbert found himself asking once a worried expression etched itself across Berwald's face.

Berwald blinked before grunting. "Berwald." he simply corrected Gilbert. "Not Berry."

"Sorry. Berwald, is there something wrong?"

Berwald frowned and kept his eyes on the ocean. "It's just... Peter hadn't come up for air for some time... will he be... alright?" Berwald almost seemed shaken when he asked.

Gilbert was ready to just wave Berwald's concern off. Peter was a merboy, right? Then it's clear that he didn't need air, at least not for some time. Besides, Gilbert could see Peter right there swimming ahead, as could Berwald.

It was the feeling of eyes on him that made Gilbert bite back his comment. He looked over at Kiku, who was steering the boat. Kiku was looking at him, eyes narrowed. His facial expression was telling Gilbert to watch what he said next. Gilbert didn't understand why Kiku was looking at him like that. Until he remembered just what Berwald had been through. He almost felt heartless forgetting, but with everything happening it was just pushed to the back of his mind.

"...He's not going to drown." Gilbert reached over and put a hand on Berwald's shoulder. "He's in his natural element... kinda. Regardless, I don't think you have to worry."

Berwald said nothing, he just stared at the water, keeping a close eye on Peter.

Gilbert looked back over at Kiku, who was also watching Peter, but for a different reason. "You don't happen to see any boats on the horizon, do you?" Kiku suddenly asked once he saw Gilbert looking at him. Gilbert almost forgot he was supposed to be on lookout. Gilbert tore his gaze away from Kiku and swiftly looked around for any lost boats.

"Nope," Gilbert confirmed once all he could see was the ocean. "How far out do you think they've gone?"

"Farther than the coast guard will look, that's for sure," Berwald mumbled his comment and Gilbert had to agree.

Gilbert adjusted himself so he was now sitting on the edge of the boat. "Gilbert-san, be careful, we don't need you flipping out of the boat," Kiku spoke calmly to him.

"Please, I'm not gonna-" It was like God had given him a middle finger. At that moment the boat hit a wave, this caused the boat to skip up and before Gilbert knew it he lost his balance and fell backward into the water.

First thing was that the ocean was *cold*. That wasn't something he expected. The ocean swirled all around him, and because of how far they've gone from the shore he couldn't fathom touching the bottom. Gilbert's head spun for just a moment as he couldn't tell which way was up, the waves were causing him to twist and turn in every way imaginable. It was disorienting.

That was when a hand touched his back. Gilbert opened his eyes to see Matthew looking at him. Matthew opened his mouth and Gilbert could see that Matthew was trying to speak to him, but Gilbert couldn't understand him or hear him for that matter.

Matthew reached over and gently cupped Gilbert's face with both of his hands. Matthew then gave Gilbert a soft smile. For a moment Gilbert took Matthew in. All of Matthew. From his hair that flowed with the wild movement of the ocean, to his lilac-colored tail that sparkled in the dazzling sunlight. '*Damn... he's beautiful.*' was the only thing Gilbert's mind could register at that moment.

Unfortunately, Gilbert was not a sea creature, and his need to breathe alerted him. Gilbert suddenly made wild and rapid movements as his lungs constricted and burned in protest. He

pointed up and Matthew was quicker than he was. Matthew wrapped one arm under Gilbert's legs and then one arm against his back. Then, like a rocket, Matthew shot for the surface.

The moment they broke through Gilbert sputtered and coughed.

"I told you to be careful!" Kiku immediately berated Gilbert. The boat now stilled, engine off. Alfred, Liam, and Peter had their heads out of the water to look at Gilbert and Matthew.

Gilbert didn't reply right away, he couldn't, he was too busy catching his breath. "Thanks..." He wheezed to Matthew as he helped him to the boat.

"Any time." Matthew laughed. Once they were close enough to Kiku's boat, Gilbert hoisted himself up and, with the help of Berwald, was back on the ship. He was soaked to the bone, his clothes leaked ocean water, and now he was freezing being out in the open air.

"Enjoy your swim?" Berwald smiled a tiny little smile when he asked and Gilbert responded with a snort while he just lightly glared at Berwald.

"Yeah, it was fucking awesome." Gilbert bit back.

"Here, try and dry off." Kiku was at least nice enough to give Gilbert a towel. The towel was pleasantly warm as it had been sitting in the sun no doubt. "Please, Gilbert, be careful from now on. We're trying to save children, we don't need to save you on top of it."

Gilbert decided to just agree and work on getting dry.

Peter snickered at him, and Gilbert looked down at him. "Got something you want to say, short-stack?"

"I just never seen Alfred jump like that- ow!" A shell flew out of nowhere and smacked Peter right in the head.

"Matthew!" Matthew yelled in frustration.

"Whatever!" Peter snapped back.

"Alright, keep it calm you two." Liam sighed as he got in between the two of them. For a moment Gilbert wondered where Alfred ran off to, turned out nowhere, he was off to the side of the boat, casually flirting with Kiku who was blushing in response. "Peter, are we getting close to Marius's nest?" Liam questioned.

"At this point, I feel like we're going home." Matthew crossed his arms as he commented.

"Well, that's because we are. Marius lives right under us."

The moment Peter said that there was just a stone-cold silence. The only sound between them was the sound of the waves and seagulls overhead.

"W-...What?" Liam finally asked. He looked absolutely horrified.

"Well, not exactly under us, but his nest is hidden in a geyser," Peter explained. He was moving his hands about in an attempt to help his brothers understand.

"But, I thought he had his own territory away from us?" Alfred asked in a soft voice.

"... This... makes a bit of sense." Liam breathed and he started to scratch at his cheek. "It also fits with Marius. Using his magic to hide under us... it's almost brilliant, but enough on that. At least we know where it is. If you're right, Peter and Marius did bring you to his actual nest, then it's just a few more miles out. Can your boat make it?" Liam turned to Kiku in question.

Kiku looked at the gas gauge and nodded. "Yes, I have some spare gas nearby as well, just... getting back maybe a bit of an issue," Kiku told Liam.

"If it comes to it, I can help haul your boat back." Alfred offered in a heartbeat. Clearly trying to show off.

"Or... he could just hook his boat to the fishing boat?" Matthew, more reasonably, suggested. Alfred scowled at that.

"Regardless, we should be moving. You three ready?" Liam asked his brothers. They nodded, he then looked to the others on the boat. Who also nodded. "Oh, and Gilbert? Please be a bit more careful." Liam requested before he disappeared under the water.

Gilbert quietly mocked Liam. "PleAsE bE mOrE cArefUl. Please, like I had meant to fall into the water." Gilbert scowled but still took his seat away from the edge. He sat there and let the sun dry him off with the help of the towel. Still, they were getting close now-

-and if Gilbert's eyes were right, then he was sure that the small dot just off of the horizon might just be the boat they were looking for.

As the brothers swam on they knew they were nearing the boat, not just because of what Peter had said, but also because of the fact that the ocean life was making itself scarce. There was magic in the water and the animals knew to flee for their own safety.

Liam was a bit more on guard now, his muscles tense and his eyes scanning around every which way, basically if Marius showed up, Liam was ready to throw down. Matthew watched Liam for a moment before looking over towards Alfred. Alfred was keeping close to the boat, no surprise there, he was closer to the boat than Peter.

"Liam?" Matthew spoke up, he had a few questions, and since they weren't there yet, he figured maybe he could get them answered now.

"Hm?" Liam looked at him.

"When you say Dad stripped Petru of his magic-"

"It's as I said. Dad took any and all of Petru's magic."

"Yes... but... surely it can't be *that* big of a deal... right? I mean you function just fine without it..."

Liam sighed. "Me not using my magic and Petru being *violently* stripped of his magic are two different things, Matthew. I still have my magic and can use it. Petru has *no* magic." Matthew knew he must have looked confused because Liam just sighed again and shook his head.

"Okay. Let me word it like this, Petru had a part of his soul and body taken away from him. Without that part of himself, he can never be healed."

Matthew thought about it for a moment. "But, Liam. *we* don't have magic." Matthew gestured between himself, Alfred, and Peter. Instantly that caused Peter to join in.

"What'ya mean? We have magic, dad said it himself. He just said it was weak." Peter asked as he swam upside down above Matthew. "That's why he never bothered to train us."

Matthew felt his disappointment rise and he opened his mouth ready to tell the truth and rip the band-aid off, but Liam put a hand on Matthew's shoulder, stopping him. All it took was a small head shake and Matthew soon realized Liam was right. If Peter knew now it'll just delay them, no doubt. "...Right. Sorry, Peter. Thanks for correcting me."

Liam and Alfred both seemed to sigh in relief and Peter swam right once again. "I guess hypothetically answering your question." Liam tried to avert the question in a way that wouldn't arouse suspicion from the youngest. "Let's say it was dad's magic helping you guys along... that would be if you didn't have magic. Now, I see your face. I know what you're thinking: If dad's magic might be keeping us just fine then why doesn't Marius's do the same for Petru? Right?"

Matthew nodded. Liam got it spot on.

"Well, you see Matt. This is where it gets complicated. Without his magic, Petru's body couldn't accept Marius's healing. Now, I'm not as well versed in this stuff as Dad or Marius, but I can tell you, Yes, I'm aware Marius found a way around it with finding a new soul to put into the body. I can't describe it but because it wasn't 'healing' and he was putting a soul into Petru's body... he was somehow able to bypass it for a short time, at least until the year's up, that is."

"It's like putting a new battery into a remote." Alfred joined in. "It works just as well, but in the end you always have to replace the battery. I know it's crude-"

"-No. That's a perfect way to describe it right now. By replacing a new soul, he's granting himself more time to heal Petru, hoping that this soul will either be the last, or he finds the cure." Liam commented.

"So... 'The cure' there is none... is there?"

"...There's one, and Dad has it tucked away."

Matthew didn't even need to think. "Dad still has Petru's magic?"

"Always had. Turns out when you rip magic out of someone, the magic won't take to another host. Magic belongs to it's owner and will stay that way."

Matthew narrowed his eyes. "What do you-"

"It's the boat!" Peter suddenly cheered and pointed forward excitedly. Matthew turned away from Liam and looked forward. Peter was right, just maybe a mile away there stood a fishing boat.

Liam put a hand on Matthew's shoulder and gave it a soft squeeze, before shooting off for the boat. Matthew stayed there for a few moments, his mind processing everything. Then, a teeny tiny voice in his brain filled him in. *'Dad tried to give Petru's magic to one of you. I know for sure it wasn't me. I would have remembered that. Peter? They are around the same age...'* Matthew found himself looking at Alfred.

Alfred looked... upset. To say the least. The twins hung back while Peter and Liam darted for the boat.

Matthew started "Dad tried to-"

"-Yes, I remember it because I remember it being *weird*," Alfred told Matthew in a soft voice. He reached over and touched Matthew's arms. "It must have happened right after Dad cursed Petru. Because he looked absolutely shaken by something. I don't think he was planning on giving it to me, I think he just wanted to be rid of it as soon as possible." Alfred started to explain quickly so the others (namely Peter) wouldn't question why they were hanging back.

Matthew just nodded, allowing his twin to continue.

"He just swooped me up into his arms. I remember flailing around madly as I didn't expect it, at all. Dad, he was crying, I thought about how strange it was to see him cry, he was the strongest man I knew... but regardless, he gave me a shaky smile, like he was trying to tell me he wasn't crying. He then told me he 'had something for me.'" Alfred frowned as he thought about it. He looked uncomfortable as he scratched at his face. "Then... he showed me this glowing white ball. It was pure white it hurt my eyes to look at."

'Magic in its purest form, no doubt.' Matthew thought but didn't voice.

"He.. well... he *shoved* it into me! Right in my chest. It hurt, I remember it hurting. It felt like it was burning me from the inside out. I know I passed out shortly after that because I woke up to Dad over me. He was holding the ball in his hands again, glaring at it, then he closed his fist around it and it vanished. He apologized and then kindly asked me to keep it to myself. That's all I really remember."

"Holy shit..." Was all Matthew could say about it all. He took all of this information in and said the only thing he could think to say. "That's fucked."

"Yeah, you're telling me. Let's go, before the others come looking for us."

"Agreed."

"Okay, children. I think it's time we all... had a talk." Tino whispered as he crouched down next to Feliks on the floor. Tino looked at his watch, it was half-past four pm and in an hour the sun will set. Like clockwork he and Feliks made rounds above the deck in hope of finding some help, but when the two and a half hours passed...

They decided it was time to tell the children. Honestly, Tino was sure most of the children figured it out on their own by now.

The children all looked at him, the hull of the ship was deathly quiet as the only sound that could be heard were the waves beating on the sides of the ship and the occasional groan it would out. The children all had different reactions on their faces, most, if not all looked... sad.

"We're stuck here... aren't we?" It was Ludwig who asked. He sat next to Feliciano and Tino saw Feliciano reach over and hold on to Ludwig's hand for support.

Feliks answered that one. "Yes." One word had so much power in that moment. Several horrified gasps rang through the air.

It wasn't a mad panic, as Tino had feared, but that didn't stop some kids from whispering to one another in fear. He was sure he heard the word 'cannibal' more than once. He raised his hands up and made a 'quiet down' motion he was used to making. It worked and the children went quiet. "Now, I'm sure by this point people are out looking for us. So there's no need to panic and there's no need to start assuming we're going to eat one another." He told them in a soft voice.

"-However." Feliks cut in as he looked at Tino. "There is something real we need to address, and that's the very real possibility of us sleeping here for tonight. I know it'll be scary. I know none of you want to do it but..." Feliks looked at Tino who just nodded. "...It's a possibility." He concluded.

Tino heard a snuffle and spotted Elise trying to hide the fact that she was crying, but was failing at it. Ravis, along with Heracles both gently patted her back in an attempt to comfort her. Tino's heart basically broke when he heard her small whisper of: "I want my big brother..."

That did it for most of the other kids as they went teary-eyed as well. Some sniffled and tried to quietly suppress their sobbing, while others didn't even bother and just openly started to sob. Hell, at this Tino felt himself go teary-eyed as well. He expected panic, he didn't expect tears.

"I-" Tino paused before he let out a cry and straightened himself out quickly. "I know. Children. I know, but please. Mr. Feliks and I... we're going to make sure you all get home to your loved ones. To your guardians, your siblings... we're doing all we can. I promise. Mr. Feliks and I won't let any harm come to you."

No child looked relieved by Tino's promises, why should they? They were trapped in the middle of the ocean with him, he was supposed to stop things like this from happening to

them... great job he did there.

"Well... great news, there will no longer be a test on this." Feliks only half-joked in an attempt to get some other emotion out of the students. Some offered teary smiles but not much else.

Tino really did fear the worst, deep down, he couldn't deny it. He truly feared that death would come for them, maybe not today, or tomorrow, but... they couldn't stay on this ship forever. Without food or water...

Tino sighed. *'Help has to be on the way. At this point the bus driver-'*

Tino was ripped violently out of his thoughts by the sound of something cutting through the air. It almost sounded like ...

"An airhorn!" Tino was on his feet faster than he could breathe. He heard the sound of little feet following behind him., no doubt the children as well as Feliks were all following him. It was a sign of help!

Tino expected the works to be out there. The coast guard, helicopters, everything...

Not a little skiff boat with only three passengers.

The boat was just off of the distance, no more than maybe twenty feet away from their ship. It looked tiny from where they were. Just a dot. Tino narrowed his eyes. He could hear the others yelling and waving their arms wildly. Feliks included.

Tino felt himself lean against the railing as he looked at the people on this skiff boat. They were too far away for him to clearly make out any faces...

but ...

The boat got closer and whoever was blasting the air horn stopped. As it was getting closer faces were becoming clearer. "*Bruder!*" Ludwig excitedly yelled. That was when, in his excitement, Ludwig pulled out a whistle and before Tino or Feliks, or anyone could stop him. He blew.

The whistle was *loud*, ungodly loud, it silenced everyone instantly as it resounded through the whole ocean. Several kids gasped, others groaned in pain, all covering their was just upset he didn't know about this whistle. If he would have known it might have come in handy earlier on. No doubt *someone* would have heard that and come their way.

Ludwig stopped blowing on the whistle and as soon as he did a voice from the boat yelled: "We're almost there! Just hold on!"

Tino looked back to the boat, it was closer now and... Tino's heart leaped into his throat.

"*Berwald!?*" Tino gasped in, excitement, horror, and astonishment. At first, he thought it couldn't have been Berwald, but no, he knew his husband anywhere!

"*Berwald! Berwald!*" Tino felt like he was going crazy as he frantically waved his arms and leaned farther and farther off of the railing, so much so that he felt himself slip, thankfully Feliks had been watching him and managed to grab Tino by the back of his collar before he tumbled into the ocean.

"Calm down!" Feliks hissed at him and had to physically stop Tino from jumping into the ocean.

"I can't! It's Berwald!" Tino felt tears prick behind his eyes, they weren't tears of sadness, no, at that moment he couldn't have been happier. "Feliks, it's Berwald!" Tino tore away from Feliks's grip and rushed for the nearest ladder.

Tino fumbled with the latch to bring the ladder down.

"As you can see children, not all hope is lost. We're going to get out of here soon, I'm sure." Feliks spoke softly to the children as they watched Tino try and fight the latch.

The little skiff boat stopped just by the ladder waiting for him to lower it.

"*Perkele!*" Tino cursed in Finnish, he made sure it was in Finnish. Finally, getting fed up, Tino stood up and stomped on the ladder, once, twice- That did it. The latch broke and down the ladder went. Only the first person on it wouldn't be going up.

Tino dropped down the ladder like a rock. "Berwald!" He cried to his beloved, the moment he touched on the skiff boat, he charged. At that moment Tino had tunnel vision. He didn't see Ludwig's brother and he didn't see the owner/driver of the boat. All he saw was Berwald.

Berwald hardly had time to ready himself and catch Tino. Tino wrapped his legs around his waist and the two were intertwined. Tino threw his arms around Berwald's neck and buried his face into the crook of Berwald's neck while Berwald kept his hands under Tino's thighs to keep him held up. Before Tino knew it he was crying again. Full-on weeping into Berwald's neck. His whole body shook as he tried to hide this from the children, who were undoubtedly watching this right now.

"Sh. I'm here." Berwald whispered.

"I was so scared."

"I know."

Tino let out a soft sob. "How'd you find us? How'd you *know*? I never told you I'd be here."

There was a pause on Berwald's side. Then Berwald let out a sigh, it was more of an irritated sigh. "It's... a long story. I'll tell you later, I promise."

"Okay...Okay..." Tino decided to just let it be and not question it for the time being. Deep down he didn't want to question it. He was just thrilled that Berwald was here with him. Berwald and Tino stayed like that for several long seconds.

Unfortunately, all good things had to come to an end and Tino had to be reminded that he was in fact a teacher and had little lives in his possession. He lowered himself to the ground and slowly unattached himself from Berwald. For a moment Tino wanted to ask about Peter's whereabouts. Obviously, Berwald wasn't going to bring Peter to the middle of the ocean, not unless he wanted to face Tino's wrath that is. Tino trusted Berwald had done what was necessary, probably dropped Peter off at Andersen's. Odds are Lukas would be the one watching Peter...

When Tino heard someone cry out he instantly looked towards the boat but it wasn't anything bad. Ludwig's older brother had boarded and was promptly knocked down by not only Ludwig but Feliciano as well.

"...Excuse me?" A small man with inky black hair and dark brown eyes tapped Tino on the shoulder. He looked rather nervous. "My name is Kiku Honda, I know this boat... this is my older brother's boat. Is he here?"

Tino felt a little confused. Kiku didn't look related to the captain that Tino had met earlier that day. Still, that didn't stop Tino from feeling angry and for a moment he almost misplaced his anger, but he stopped, reminding himself that this man was here to save them. "If you're talking about the captain, no, he left us at the docks... but... could you possibly be talking about Yao?"

Kiku looked confused. "I am talking about Yao, and he is the captain of this boat. Is he okay?"

Now, Tino was extra confused. He tried to replay earlier that day in his mind and he was *sure* the older gentleman he talked to confirmed that he was the captain and Yao was his second in command. Still, in the end, that detail just didn't matter to Tino.

"Yao abandoned us!" He couldn't stop himself from yelling at Kiku. He wasn't blaming Kiku for their abandonment, far from it. "He took the lifeboat and left!"

Kiku's eyes grew wide and he brought his hand to his face in shock. "That... that doesn't sound like Yao at all... unless..." His face turned serious.

"Unless?! Unless what? What could justify him abandoning children out in the middle of the ocean?!" Tino demanded.

Kiku's eyes went from Tino to Berwald.

"Tino, please. You don't need to raise your voice." Berwald spoke in a slow tone. It was comforting for Tino to hear and it did make him pause.

"I'm sorry..." Kiku apologized as he lowered his head. "I'm aware this is a stressful time. I was just thinking about my brother. I have no clue why he chose to abandon you or the children, but you don't need to worry. We're going to bring you guys home."

"... I shouldn't have shouted." Tino apologized just as well. "I'm sorry." Tino put his hands over his eyes and he shook his head. It had been one hell of a day. Still, in the darkness of his

own mind, Tino had a weird thought.

When Kiku looked at Berwald. It almost looked like Kiku was silently asking for some sort of permission.

'You're tired and not thinking right.' He told himself as he lowered his hand and reopened his eyes.

Tino then pinched the bridge of his nose and looked at Kiku. "The radio and GPS have both been cut." He told Kiku. "Aside from that everything else seems to be intact."

"Hm, that's not good, but I'll see what I can do." Kiku went for the ladder.

Tino didn't want to climb back up to the boat, but he knew he'd be letting his students down if he just stayed in Kiku's boat. So, it was with a heavy heart did he and Berwald start walking for the ladder up to the fishing boat. However; before they got to the ladder, Tino had the weirdest feeling of being watched.

Out of instinct, he whipped his head around. He honestly expected someone to be in the water watching him, but what he saw was a little more confusing and it made him wonder if he was losing it. He saw a tail. From the size of it he assumed it had to be a dolphin, which wasn't anything new, they've seen pods of dolphins when coming out here.

But it was the strangest thing, this dolphin had to be cherry colored to produce a tail like that.

Dusk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Matthew was hit first. They were all so wrapped up in finding the boat that they had let their guard down for a second too long. Marius came blasting, a ball of magic hitting Matthew directly in the small of his back.

It *burned* even under the water, it absolutely burned like he was on fire.

Matthew cried out and crashed to the ground trying to grab onto the wound out of instinct. "Mattie!" It was Alfred who called to him in alarm, but just like Matthew, Marius struck Alfred, but in a different way.

Marius bound Alfred, covering his mouth, hands, and tail with magic sending Alfred sinking down to the bottom next to Matthew. Alfred kicked and tried to scream, but his mouth was bound so all that came out was muffled yells of alarm.

"Now. That was easy." Marius grinned as he lowered himself down to their level. Matthew tried to get up, but the pain was just too much. "Then again, I never expected such a fight from you two-" Peter rounded the corner and tackled Marius.

This caused the two of them to spin in the water. Peter raised and lowered his fists, hitting Marius wherever he could with the blunt side of his little fists, the face, the shoulder, the chest. Still, Peter wasn't exactly 'strong'. Marius grabbed Peter by his wrist and to Matthew's horror, he watched as Marius's magic flared.

Peter screamed in pain, his whole body tensing, seizing, as Matthew could see Marius's red magic *under* Peter's skin. As if Magic wasn't scary enough, you didn't need to blast at people to cause them pain. You could just touch them. It was a scream that Matthew would never be able to get out of his head.

"Marius!" Liam came bounding and Marius let go of Peter. Peter fell to the ground, unconscious. No doubt from the pain.

Liam already had Marius in a chokehold. Liam hissed between clenched teeth as he tightened his arm around Marius's neck. Marius gagged in surprise. Liam looked downright murderous and Matthew realized that Liam was more than pissed, obviously, Marius had tortured Peter in just a short amount of time, but it was *more* than that. Liam was *tired*. He was tired of just chasing Marius off, he was tired of losing to Marius. No, Matthew realized that Liam wanted it to just *end* before anybody else got hurt.

Matthew could only watch in horror as Marius gagged, coughed, and sputtered while Liam kept an ironclad grip around his throat and for a moment Matthew wondered if it'd be that easy. For Liam to strangle Marius to death right here and now.

Of course, it was *never* that simple. Liam was blasted back in a flash of bright red.

Marius coughed and spat before he turned to Liam. "Okay. Is that how you want to play?" Marius snarled and curled in his fingers inwards as his hands started to glow. '*You're not a spectator anymore, get up and do something!*' Matthew's mind roared at him once he realized that, like Liam, Marius too just wanted it to end. Matthew knew if he didn't do something then Marius was going to do everything in his power to kill Liam with this next shot.

Matthew ignored his pain and rushed at Marius, grabbing him by his hair and yanking as hard as he could right before Marius shot. It worked, Marius's shot missed Liam, but that didn't stop it from shooting *out* of the water. It didn't hit the boat, thank god, but Matthew was pretty sure that everybody could see it.

Marius spun and grabbed Matthew by his throat with one hand. Matthew gasped not expecting it. "You think you can beat me?" Marius challenged as he tightened his grip around Matthew's throat. His hands were cold and his nails were sharp, threatening to puncture Matthew's skin at any given moment.

Still, Matthew couldn't help himself. "Not like it's hard." He managed to wheeze out. There was a moment where the two of them just stared each other down and then Marius grinned. That wiped any smile off of Matthew's face in an instant. Still, Matthew saw Liam coming back for just a moment he felt okay-

Marius shot a hand and his magic shot out like a rope and in an instant wrapped around Liam's throat. Now it was Liam that was gagging as he reached for the magic. Matthew was painfully reminded that Liam only knew the *basics* of magic, meaning he had no clue how to free himself in this situation. Matthew watched at Liam's hands and eyes glowed as he tried to fight the magic, but it did nothing. Marius was just too strong and with one push Liam was thrown to the ground and held in place.

Liam thrashed around so violently that he caused the sand to rise and lightly cloud around them, obscuring their vision. Matthew could hear Alfred *screaming* through his binds. Not like he was in pain, but more in frustration. He was bound in place and there was nothing he could do but watch, judging by the sounds, Matthew could only figure that Alfred was also struggling against his binds.

Matthew tried to scratch at Marius's wrist in a pitiful and desperate attempt to get Marius to let go of his throat. It did nothing. "You and your brothers are *nothing* and you're delusional if you even *think*-" Marius tightened his grip on Matthew's windpipe. Really, him not being able to breathe wasn't much of an issue under the water, but that didn't mean that he *liked* the feeling of being strangled. "-That you can fight me and *win*. You're mistaken. I will *destroy* you."

It was then did Matthew feel what Peter felt just moments before. It was like electrocution, but somehow *worse*. Magic surged through his entire body and attacked him from the inside it invaded every nerve, every pore, every muscle. It was nothing but pure *pain*. His muscles spasmed and seized wildly and he shook every which way. Matthew gritted his teeth afraid that they were going to break while he squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

Matthew wasn't even screaming. He couldn't, not with Marius keeping a grip around his neck. Not that it mattered, all he felt was pain, pain in every one of his senses.

This...

This was torture in every sense of the word. Pure torture and when Matthew dared to open one of his eyes to look at Marius he saw the sick bastard was *smiling*, and it feared Matthew that there was a real probability that that sick smile was going to be one of the last things he was ever going to see.

The moment Matthew passed out, it was like something sparked inside of Liam. That was *two* of his brothers that Marius had tortured without mercy or even a lick of compassion.

Liam gnashed his teeth together and knew there was no more hiding. This wasn't just him chasing Marius away, this was so much more with a lot more on the line. Liam knew that he couldn't just hide behind his strength. Liam felt his magic flare inside of him and raised one of his hands.

In that moment he didn't see his once Uncle Marius, he saw a monster. A monster that had to pay. It was a brilliant flash of dark green that struck Marius right into the side. Marius's magic flickered in his shock and Liam was able to free himself. "*Marius!*" Liam screamed as he swam up and shot at Marius again with magic.

Marius was faster this time and made a shield protecting himself.

"Oh..." Marius grinned, his eyes glowing red, but his shield vanished within seconds. Liam realized that Marius was looking at him with the vision. "I never knew... I never bothered to check you." Marius almost seemed to coo as he watched Liam. "Such potential, obviously wasted." He blinked and his eyes returned to normal.

Liam gritted his teeth and with a sudden jerk of both of his arms he brought his magic out. "I may only know the basics but I'm still going to kick your ass!" With that declaration Liam attacked. Marius was quick, quicker than Liam anticipated. With a sweep of his tail, he kicked sand up into Liam's face. Impairing his vision instantly.

"Using my own tricks against me?! Coward!" Liam hissed and he tried to look around, but it seemed Marius had kicked up more than a bit of sand. There was so much sand around him that Liam couldn't see no matter which way he looked.

Liam held his breath; spinning around wildly in place to try and place Marius.

That was when Marius's attack came from his left. The blast of magic just grazed his shoulder, it burned. Marius, despite living in the sea, seemed to have a thing for 'fire' so to speak. Liam twisted his body towards where the attack was shot and he fired back. His own magic blasted through the sand, but judging by the silence he didn't hit his target.

Liam's heart started to race as he tried his hardest to find where Marius was firing at him from, but no, Marius was swimming around him, circling Liam like a shark would, waiting

for the perfect moment to strike Liam down. He frantically looked about but there's one thing Marius had to know, that the sand wasn't going to stay up forever. Most of it was already starting to slowly lower to the ground.

Liam saw a bit of red out of the corner of his vision and didn't even hesitate. He shot.

His magic hit Marius's fin. Marius cursed out and fell back a bit. Liam then swam and, in a move he only really used for his brothers, wrapped his arms tightly around Marius's arms in a restraining bear hug. Marius instantly started to writhe against Liam in an attempt to free himself.

Liam used all his momentum to push Marius and the two of them tumbled to the sandy floor. Marius cursed and tried to kick, but there was a reason Liam often used this move against his brothers after all, it was the most effective move Liam had in order to restrain them. Liam just had one goal in mind. Knock Marius out... or kill him. He was going to do one of those things today, he knew that much.

His magic flared as he tightened his grip around Marius's arms and torso. *'Let's see how you like it...'* was the only thought Liam had as he thought about Matthew and Peter and the pain they went through. Liam never had such training from his father, but somehow, he knew. He knew magic like that didn't need training. He just needed rage and he was *filled* with it.

So, Liam gave Marius a good taste of his own medicine. Liam squeezed Marius tighter and just let his magic go wild. It really wasn't that hard, Marius screamed in pain as Liam could feel his magic coursing through Marius's veins. Marius writhed and flopped around in Liam's arms as he tried to free himself.

For just a moment Liam had thought that maybe, just maybe, he had Marius beat. He was just going to keep him held like this until he passed out, but Liam should have known; taking down Marius was never going to be easy.

Marius couldn't free his arms but that didn't stop him from still being able to use his magic. It was like a bomb gone off as with a blast of energy and magic, Liam was forced off of Marius and flew for just a moment before, not just hitting the ground, but also striking his shoulder against a nearby patch of staghorn coral.

"Oh, Liam. It's like I said. Your magic was wasted on Arthur." Marius spoke softly. "You have great potential, I can see it clear as day." Liam felt his teeth gnash together as he pulled himself off of the coral patch. Part of the coral had broken off and impaled itself into his arm. Liam hissed in pain as he looked up at Marius. As much as he wanted to pull the coral out of his arm, he couldn't afford to distract himself.

"I don't exactly care about what 'potential' I have." Liam decided to enlighten Marius with a response.

"Oh?"

"Don't think it's lack of trying on Pop's part either. He wanted nothing more than to train me." Liam hadn't realized it right away, but his hands were shaking. Was it pain? Lack of blood?

Or nerves?

"You... *refused* training?" It was like Marius just couldn't wrap his head around what Liam had just told him.

Liam wanted nothing more than to ignore Marius's question and just continue their fight, but something blue caught his eye. It was Alfred, at some point either Marius's magic had worn off or Marius had let go of Alfred by mistake, either way, Alfred was behind Marius and moving slow. Instantly Liam knew what Alfred was going to do. They locked eyes and Alfred put a finger to his lips. Liam looked down, hoping he didn't give Alfred away by staring for too long.

"Why would I want magic?" Liam suddenly bit back at Marius. "After what you did to that fishing boat-

"-Will I never hear the end of that?!" Marius hissed between clenched teeth. "I was trying to *help*, those fishermen not only took our food but polluted the water with their cigarettes and other trash- no- *no!* I'm done defending myself! What's done is *done!*-" Marius twisted his body and like Matthew he had Alfred held tightly by the throat with one hand. "-Isn't that right?" He sneered at Alfred. If Alfred could spit in the water he would have at that moment. "How many of you do I have to knock out?"

Liam took this moment to free his arm from the staghorn. Honestly, Liam didn't even think. He grabbed it by its base and he yanked it out in one swift motion. His arm not only started to bleed, but his open wound burned in the salty ocean water. Liam looked at the staghorn in his hand and was relieved that the tip didn't break off and embed in his skin.

He looked up at Marius and Alfred. Liam had no memory of stabbing Marius with the coral, but when his blackout was over and he came back to the present he couldn't deny that he had done it. Liam backed up in shock, he had stabbed Marius in the side causing him to let go of Alfred. Liam had buried the coral deep into Marius's side.

The world moved in slow motion, Marius looked at Liam, his eyes were wide and his hands shook violently before moving to his side where the coral was. Blood was seeping out of the wound at a slow pace and filled the water around them. "Okay-" Marius wheezed, his teeth clenched and that was when Liam shot at him with a blast of magic, this sent Marius spiraling into the floor. His body struck the ground and then just stayed there. Still.

"Holy shit..." Alfred let out a scared whisper as he looked down at Marius's prone form. "Did you...?" he trailed off before looking at Liam.

Liam felt his jaw clench and his teeth grit, the pain in his arm increasing. "I don't know... just go and check on your brothers for me, okay?" Liam hurriedly shooed Alfred away. "You were brave." Alfred gave a small smile and turned ready to do what was asked of him. "Oh, Alfred?" Alfred turned his head over his shoulder in question. Eyebrow raised up. "I'm proud of you."

Alfred didn't say anything and he *tried* to hide his little happy smile, but it was so obvious he was beaming on the inside. With a flick of his tail Alfred left to check on Peter and Matthew.

Liam was glad to have this time alone. It meant he could drop his brave face for just a moment. All at once emotions rushed at him, the pain in his arm suddenly intensifying. Liam forced back tears of pain and bit his lip. *'Let's heal this up.'* Liam decided and cupped his injury. He's been hurt in the past, This wasn't his first time he was thrown into a coral patches, but never stabbed, he's been bitten by many things, even stung by jellyfish, but for whatever reason this pain was worse than any of those.

'I've never been stabbed before, that's gotta be it.' Yeah. That's gotta be it. He decided on the fly.

Liam tried to focus on healing his injury, but his mind was just moving too wild from all his thoughts and emotions that struck him that it made healing impossible at the moment. Liam's hands continued to shake and a part of him honestly just wanted to curl up into a ball and just sleep or cry, but he couldn't. No, his brothers needed him now more than ever.

So, Liam pushed all his feelings into the back of his mind for the time being. He had to focus on healing himself or else sharks will be on them sooner rather than later. He looked at Marius's prone body and turned his back to it, hoping maybe that'll help his racing mind calm down.

Liam shut his eyes and just focused on his throbbing arm. His magic flickered and licked against his wound. He could feel it swirl about before it got to work resealing the open wound. Not exactly a pleasant experience as the staghorn had inserted itself deep into his forearm. Still, Liam was thankful that the staghorn didn't break off into his arm. Not something he wanted his brothers having to yank out of him.

As Liam healed the hairs on the back of his neck startled to prick. Liam dropped his arm, it was healed enough anyways, and jerked his head over his shoulder just in time to get a face full of sand. "Son of a bitch!" Liam cursed and squeezed his eyes shut out of instinct. "That's it." Liam felt his teeth grit and before he knew it he bolted for the surface. "If you want me, come and face me!" He yelled to the sandy water. Though Liam knew, he just knew that Marius was right behind him.

He had qualms around fighting in the water in the view of children and other humans alike, but if he was on the surface level then that meant one very important thing. Marius couldn't hide behind cowardly tricks.

"Is it even possible to rewire the radio?" Tino questioned as he crouched down. Gilbert was laying on his back looking up at the cut wires. "I mean... I don't think it's the same as hotwiring a car." Tino commented softly.

Tino, Gilbert, and Kiku excused themselves to look over the console and the damage done. While Berwald stayed behind to help Feliks with the children. Despite being scary looking, he really was a teddy bear when it came to children. Not only that but Tino had a suspicion that the children took an instant liking to Berwald because of his height and build. Someone big and strong they can trust during this scary time.

"No, it's not," Gilbert grunted as he found the other half of the cut cord. "But it shouldn't be an impossible task- ow!" Gilbert cursed in German as he flicked his hand. "The wires are live, I repeat, the wires are live," Gilbert told them as he scooted out from under the console. He shook the hand that got shocked. "That makes putting it back together a little more difficult."

Kiku sighed and crossed his arms over his chest as he thought for a moment. He sat in the driver seat and tapped at the steering wheel. He kept his eyes on the water out below and just stared intensely.

Tino sighed and lightly played with a waterproof flare between his fingers. He had found them tucked under the console, well, Gilbert had found them. Unlike the flare gun, these flares were used specifically for underwater, most divers use them, which made Tino wonder why they were here to start with. Probably just some safety measure he was sure. Unbeknownst to the other two with him, Tino had taken the liberty to pocket one. Like the flare gun it was a 'just in case' situation. A child might fall in and he wanted to be prepared.

"Okay, so the radio is live, what about the GPS? Can that be fixed?" Tino, almost desperately, asked. "We don't need outside communication if we can just get to land."

Gilbert reached for the wire in question and inspected it. "I...I really don't want to touch this to find out if it's live or not." Gilbert finally confessed.

"If both wires are live then how the hell did Yao cut them without seriously injuring himself?" Tino questioned.

"Maybe he cut them when the power was off?" Gilbert suggested before looking at Kiku. Kiku focused back on them and blinked.

"It's a possibility," Kiku spoke softly as he said it. It's clear that something else was on his mind but he didn't want to vocalize it.

"But then... no. I guess it makes sense." Tino sighed and started to pace. His feet crunching against the glass on the floor with each step. "Why us? What did we do to him? Why even do this!?" Tino cursed in Finnish.

It then did Kiku have an epiphany. "We can use my GPS..." His voice was soft as he realized it when he spoke. "I always keep one in my boat- Give me a minute." Kiku jumped from the seat.

Tino and Gilbert followed after him and they quickly bounded down the stairs. "Finally, something is looking-" Tino was speaking but was silenced. Not by someone, but by *something*. Something that made him stop dead in his tracks and flinch back like he was going to be struck.

A red ball of light shooting out of the water like a bat out of hell. This wasn't like a firework, something that colors would have been diluted by the sunlight, this was... something else entirely as the deep red color was prominent even in the daylight. Tino almost expected it to explode as a flare would, but it just...fizzled out.

Obviously, everyone else saw it as well, The kids let out mixes of gasps of amazement and screams of terror. Tino saw Berwald bolt for the side of the boat and from the way he threw himself against the railing, Tino almost feared that Berwald was going to jump into the water himself. He didn't, thank goodness, but he was searching the water frantically, almost insanely so.

Tino jogged down the steps and stopped before getting to Berwald. Instead, he turned his body towards the children and Feliks. "Everyone good?"

"Yes, it shocked them... what was that?" Feliks questioned with a shaky voice. "I've never seen anything like it before. Have you?"

"No. Never..." Tino looked up towards the sky, but the ball was gone. He looked over his shoulder a second later to see that Gilbert was now sporting an uneasy face as was Kiku. Tino narrowed his eyes at this, but for the moment at hand he opted to ignore it. Instead he turned and went for Berwald. Tino didn't want to startle Berwald so he lightly placed a hand on Berwald's back before coming into his view.

"Is everything alright?" Tino softly asked Berwald and followed Berwald's gaze to the ocean. The water was calming from the ripple that *thing* made. Berwald didn't answer right away, he paused before his back relaxed against Tino's touch.

"I just wanted to be sure it didn't hit Kiku's boat." Berwald cleared his throat after a pause.

Tino frowned slightly. "So... you know what it is?" He whispered so softly that he was afraid Berwald didn't hear him after another moment of silence. "Was it a flare? A firework? What?" Tino probed a little deeper.

Berwald's mouth twitch and Tino saw a small knowing smile form on Berwald's lips for just a moment before it disappeared. Tino could just hear Berwald's thoughts at that moment. *'You wouldn't believe me even if I told you.'* Tino pursed his lips in annoyance at this. It was then did he realize the thing that was right in front of his face the whole time. Berwald was *hiding* something from him and that scared him.

Berwald never kept secrets from him, never. He was always a very open person (To Tino mostly). So, that left one question on Tino's mind: Was Berwald hiding something to protect him? Tino frowned as he thought of the question and looked at his husband.

"Berwald." Tino huffed in a whisper that got Berwald's attention. "I'm not dumb. You didn't find us by coincidence." Tino grasped the railing of the boat tightly with one of his hands while he kept the other on Berwald's back. "I know after everything that happened, not just today, but with this past year, you want to protect me. Fine, I appreciate it. But I'm not a flower, I won't wilt. I *can't* wilt, not now. Please, stop hiding things and just tell me what you know." Tino lightly balled his fist around Berwald's shirt, making it bunch up in the back. "I *need* to know what level of danger these kids are in."

Berwald looked at Tino, clear desperation in his eyes. He didn't want to tell Tino, that much Tino could see for himself, but Berwald couldn't argue with Tino either. "It's Pe-"

"Whoa! Look at that!" Heracles suddenly exclaimed, making Tino whip his head to see what the children were looking at. At some point, Heracles had broken away to peer into the water near the railing. Once Heracles yelled a bunch of other students, as well as Feliks and Gilbert, came to see what he was looking at.

Tino didn't need to join in, because he could see it perfectly fine from where he and Berwald were standing.

The water was lighting up. It was like Christmas lights blinking on and off. Red and green violently fought with each other. The water moved with these lights like it wasn't exactly light, something more physical that was pushing and pulling the water in that one spot. Tino for some reason felt his throat start to tighten uneasily. With each light, his anxiety started to spike. Why was this bothering him so?

Because lights don't flash that brightly in the sunlight and they sure as hell don't flash like that *underwater*.

Tino heard Ludwig speaking and he turned his head to see Ludwig speaking to Gilbert. Tino stared at them for several moments when he realized they were speaking in German. Meaning they didn't want anybody else to know what they were talking about.

It wasn't just Berwald that was hiding something from Tino, it was Gilbert and Kiku as well. They all *knew* something. Something that was no doubt connected to this weird light show everyone was witnessing.

"What could it be? I've heard of fish using lights to bait prey, but...this?" Feliks turned to Tino for answers. Tino knew he had a shocked expression on his face when he shook his head in response because Feliks frowned at him.

Then, with one final flash of dark green the lights stopped. Nobody spoke, the only sound to be heard was the waves crashing against the boat and the occasional creaking or groan the boat gave. "Kiku?" Tino turned his head towards Kiku in question. Kiku, like everyone else, had been looking down at the waves. He blinked and then looked at Tino.

"Please, get your GPS so we can get the hell out of Dodge." Tino's voice cracked as he realized how tense he had become in just a short amount of time.

Kiku's eyes suddenly hardened and he nodded with renewed determination. "*Hai!*" and Kiku went for his little boat that had been tied to the ship with rope. Something Tino had missed earlier on. Kiku only got one step down from the ladder when-

"There's a guy in the water!" Someone, Tino honestly wasn't sure as to who, yelled in complete shock. A bunch of kids gasped and Tino couldn't lie. He gasped as well. There *was* someone in the water. A guy with brown hair that clung to the sides of his face as he emerged from the water, but to Tino's horror, this guy wasn't alone.

It happened so fast.

Another man with lighter brown hair came up to the surface and made a mad grab from the more muscular man. "No!" Berwald growled between clenched teeth. Tino felt his blood turn cold watching as these two violently fought in the water. The one with the lighter, and longer hair, slammed the other man into the side of the boat.

"Not the nice man...." Tino undoubtedly heard Feliciano whisper nervously as he watched on in horror, Feliciano had his eyes opened as he looked on.

*'The nice man?... like... **THE** nice man?! The one that saved him last year?'* Tino's head was whirling as he looked down at the water in shock. He knew about 'The nice man' because Feliciano used to bring him up in conversation, didn't Feliciano show Tino a picture of *'The nice man?'* once?

"Didn't he say the nice man had a...a ... tail?"

Tino slowly turned his gaze away from the two men trying to kill each other and looked at Berwald. Their eyes met. The world suddenly moved slowly when their eyes met. Just like earlier Tino was able to telepathically connect to Berwald, only this time, Berwald was also able to do the same thing. They were on the same wavelength.

Berwald took Tino's hands into his own and just said one word. "Yes."

It was like the world was spinning back to normal. Just one word and Tino reached into his slacks and pulled out the flare gun. "Which one." He spoke slowly to Berwald. "Which one is trying to hurt us." He made sure to keep the gun out of view for the time being. He was also keeping his voice low.

"Light brown... Tino..." Berwald tightened his grip. He wanted to say something, something desperate, but he couldn't. Tino saw him struggle with his words before frowning. He felt his grip turn to iron around the base of the flare gun as he reminded himself of trigger discipline. "...aim for his head." Berwald finally snarled out.

It was surprising to hear, no doubt, but Tino nodded regardless. He looked to see where Kiku was before he raised his flare gun. Kiku was still at the top of the ladder watching this all unfold with wide eyes.

'As long as he's out of the way.' Tino sighed in his thoughts. *'I have two shots. Flares do damage, but it won't be enough to kill him.'* Still, Tino looked over at the children and then at Feliks. They locked eyes.

"Tino-"

Tino climbed the railing.

"Tino!" Feliks almost screamed in alarm. Tino wasn't going to jump, he just needed to be on the other side to get a clear shot. "Tino, what are you doing!" Feliks shouted in a more berating and worried tone. That was when Feliks suddenly grabbed Tino by his sleeve forcing Tino to look at him. There was chatter and mutters from the kids as they whispered and

watched Tino with wide eyes. If he had it his way he wouldn't subject them to this, but he had *no choice*. He looked down at the two men then back at Feliks.

"Let him go, Feliks." Gilbert hissed suddenly. Feliks looked back at Gilbert, then back at Tino. It was clear that Feliks didn't want this at all, but. Feliks also knew Tino. He looked at Tino and bit his lip before backing up.

"I hope you know what you're doing..."

"I just wish it weren't in front of the children." Tino answered in a voice hardly above a whisper. He didn't want the kids to see this, to see their teacher which they respected shoot someone down. Again, the flare wouldn't kill the man, but no doubt this will have a lasting effect.

Tino looked back at the two men. The one with the lighter brown hair...his hands... they were *glowing*. '*Glowing the same color as the ball!*'

Tino's body worked on autopilot once he made the connection. He raised the flare and lined up the shot. Several kids were suddenly screaming, all those drills, those safety precautions, were all pushed into the back of Tino's mind. He was a teacher and he was going to protect these students at any cost.

Tino fired.

The flare let out a loud *pop!* It was so loud it startled everyone and Tino saw the kids duck down out of instinct. Tino produced his own bright red ball as the flare ejected from the gun in an explosion of light.

As expected the flare hit his target right in the head. The man let out a scream as the fire burned his skin, but didn't stick. Still, this gave the nice man enough time to punch the other away. Oh, but their fight was far from over. Tino didn't even expect for something to grab his right leg. It grabbed him by his ankle.

Tino felt his heart sink as a icy cold fear gripped him. His whole world felt like it was slowed down. He tried to turn towards Berwald to hold on to his husband for dear life, then before Tino knew it, he was weightless as his leg was jerked out from under him and down he fell with only a lone gasp leaving his mouth as he was just centimeters away from Berwald.

"*Tino!*" Berwald screamed, yes, screamed in horror.

Tino's back hit the water first. The water was cold and when he fell it *hurt*, knocking the wind right out of him. His body spun and an extreme sense of vertigo overtook him, making it impossible to figure out which way was up or down.

Still, when his whole body was submerged in the water it was oddly peaceful for him as he just laid there in the open water. His body bobbed up and down with the waves, and with all his senses muted in the water it just made it easier for his vertigo to slowly vanish. Tino could have laid there forever if he could breathe underwater. Slowly, he straightened himself up in the water.

Tino looked up at the surface and started to swim.

The moment he broke through the surface the first thing he heard was screaming and crying from the students up above the massive boat. He looked up at the boat, using his hand to shield the sun from his face. It was Sadik that spotted him first.

"Mr. Tino is alive!" Sadik screamed to everyone else. This caused the other students to run to the railings to watch him.

"Tino!" Berwald suddenly rushed to the railing. "Swim to Kiku's boat, hurry!" It was a worried demand, pure and simple. Tino knew better than to question Berwald. The only other time he saw Berwald so worried like this was when Sven...

Tino pushed the thought to the back of his mind and just started to swim for the little skiff boat. Kiku was already on his boat, he had his hand out desperately trying to urge Tino to swim faster. "Hurry!" Berwald almost seemed to cry.

"C'mon..." Kiku urged and stretched his arm out even farther, if that were possible.

Kiku was only just a few feet away from Tino, just a few measly feet, but before Tino could even lift his arm out of the water to take Kiku's hand, his own scratchy, sobby, voice suddenly echoed in his thoughts.

'He was grabbed, I swear!'

Before Tino knew it his ankle was grabbed and down under the waves he went.

The world could have stopped at that exact moment. Kiku watched as Tino was brutally dragged under the waves. Berwald let out a scream and seemed ready to jump in the ocean himself. Anything to save his husband. *'If he jumps in he's as good as dead.'* It didn't take a brain surgeon to figure that out. Kiku saw that Gilbert was fighting Berwald, like, physically fighting the bigger man to the ground and may even be trying to pin him.

Marius was ruthless, he wasn't going to stop at anything until he got what he wanted. He didn't care who he hurt or killed along the way.

Kiku had to do *something*, anything, but what? What could he possibly do in this situation?

It was almost like god was talking to Kiku at that moment, not in his head or anything like that, but more like showing him a sign as there was a soft rapping noise above him as a gust of wind blew by. Kiku looked up and saw the fishing net hanging off of the side of the boat. Just waiting to be used.

'But using a net like that takes time, time I don't have. Not only that but what if I capture Peter or Liam or-'

Kiku felt a light bulb pop off above his head as he looked at the ring that rested on his middle finger. Kiku bolted from one end of his boat to the next. He opened a compartment that second as a seat. Kiku threw the life jackets to the side as he grabbed his casting net out. It

was a simple nine foot fishing net, nothing as grand as his brother's net hanging above his head, but this net caught Alfred. *'It was a shock pulling him out of the water.'* Kiku couldn't help but smile at the memory.

He tied the net around his wrist, the weights clanking loudly as he did this. He hoisted the net up. Kiku has done this so many times that it was almost muscle memory to him. The only issue was he knew he had the possibility of accidently netting Tino, but in the end, that wouldn't be so bad either. Kiku grabbed the skirt of the net out with his other hand and looked into the water. The water looked almost black in the sunlight, the sunlight that was starting to fade.

Kiku shut his eyes. *'If I can catch Alfred... then I can catch Marius!'* Kiku casted his net out and he watched as the skirt opened up, flaring out for just a second before landing in the water with a resounding *Splash!*

Down the net went. Kiku shut his eyes and focused on the rope around his wrist. *'Please...'* Kiku silently prayed. *'Please...'* he squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip so hard that he tasted blood. He exhaled.

Then pulled.

Instantly he was met with resistance, but much like with Alfred, he stood his ground, propping a foot up on the side of his boat, and used all of his might to pull the net in. Unlike Alfred, something else caught his attention. Red. Bright red light and Kiku felt fear grip his whole body for just a moment.

There was the sound of bubbles coming to the surface before Tino broke up to the surface sputtering and coughing loudly, Alfred and Matthew both right next to him, helping him swim to the boat. It was like they were his bodyguards.

Kiku grinned the biggest grin, like he was the cat that got the canary, because in reality, he was. *'I will never be able to do this again.'* Hey, the fact that he caught not one but two Merman in his lifetime was good enough for him. There was a sudden tug on the net that almost tipped him off of his boat, Kiku managed to straighten himself out and pull back.

"Tino!" Berwald's booming voice yelled from up top the boat. Kiku looked up for just a moment and saw that Gilbert was standing next to Berwald now.

"Berwald-" Tino gasped out in surprise when Matthew and Alfred helped lift him up so he was on Kiku's boat. It rocked the boat a little bit but not too much. Someone let go too early and Tino fell harshly on his back. Kiku and Tino locked eyes. "Thank you..." Tino whispered to Kiku.

"Hai, just get up to your husband before he jumps in. Gilbert had to stop him-"

"-Good..." Tino breathed softly as he looked up at the sky. "He nearly..." Tino shook his head wildly and put his hand to his throat. His eyes wide and scared.

"It's okay now." Matthew spoke softly and Alfred silently nodded. Kiku noted the frown that stayed on Alfred's face and how it seemed that even Matthew was shaking slightly.

"If I didn't have that flare-"

"Go to your husband." Alfred finally spoke up in a demanding tone. "Go, and for fucksake, stay on the boat. Marius isn't done."

Tino finally sat up before slowly nodding. They all watched as he went up the ladder and embraced Berwald. "Oh-" Kiku gasped when the tugging suddenly stopped. Instantly he got to pulling the net in-

The net was fine, just empty. Kiku instantly turned to the twins. "Don't worry about him." Alfred seethed softly. He had his hands on his shoulders and was shaking. "He probably teleported away, the coward... the absolute coward..."

"To be fair." Matthew huffed. "I'd teleport away too if I were him."

Kiku blinked. He threw his net to the side of the boat and crouched down so he was level with them. "What happened down there?"

"... Marius... he was sucking Tino's soul right out of his body." Alfred shuddered and shook his head. "It was horrible to watch Kiku. I think he was just getting desperate and just wanted a soul, any soul... he had Tino by his neck and using his magic to... physically pull Tino's soul out of his body.-"

"-Kiku, if you hadn't have cast your net, we might have lost Tino." Matthew reached up and patted Kiku's hand softly. "That being said..." Matthew bit the inside of his cheek. "Tino is a bit of a fighter, we found that out. When your net fell over Marius, it distracted him long enough for Tino to light a flare he had on him."

Alfred spoke next with another shudder. "I don't know what's more disturbing. Watching someone get their soul almost sucked out of them, or watching someone get their eyeball burnt."

Matthew hissed to Kiku in a more warning tone. "Regardless; I don't think Marius is returning for the time being. Get what you need and get the hell out of here before he has time to recover."

In all honesty, Kiku didn't need to be told twice.

"Liam!" Matthew rushed towards his brother. Liam was on the ocean floor laying face down and for just a moment he feared that Liam was dead. Liam weakly lifted his head before letting it fall back down. Matthew breathed a sigh of relief and rushed to Liam's side.

He looked awful. Exhausted mainly, but he had little bruises and cuts along his body, as well as a deep gash on his right arm that wasn't bleeding, but looked fresh and inflamed. Matthew

was careful as he wiggled under Liam and helped him sit up. Liam winced in pain before groaning.

"Are you okay?"

Liam opened one eye. "Do I *look* okay?"

"... No. In fact, you look like dolphin shit."

Liam gave a half-hearted laugh before coughing. "Yeah, I feel like it as well."

Alfred came over and frowned. "Are you going to be able to help us escort the boat back to the land?" Alfred was gentle as he took one of Liam's hands.

"I don't think so-" Liam shifted a little and grimaced before inhaling sharply. "Not only did Marius get a few lucky shots in, but, I've used up a lot of energy." He explained before sighing out softly; "I can't even heal myself right now. The downside of magic."

Matthew and Alfred both shared a concerned look. That was when Peter came over. "Liam..." Peter gasped softly. None of them have ever seen Liam like this, never. He was usually so full of energy (and occasionally spite) but he just looked so... defeated and beaten.

Matthew felt anger start to boil in the base of his belly when he saw the dark fingerprints around Liam's neck. Marius had done more than just get a few 'lucky shots in.' "Well, we aren't going to leave you in open water." Alfred growled and placed his hands on his hips. "That's just asking for you to get eaten by sharks."

"...I'll take him home." Matthew suddenly offered. "It's not far, dad has to be home, right? He can heal you, or even Lillie if it comes to that."

"Dad..." Liam groaned suddenly and shook his head. "He's going to be so disappointed. He never wanted you guys involved..." Matthew was sure Liam wasn't thinking correctly.

"He'll be *more* than disappointed if you wind up dead." Matthew pointed out and then grabbed both of Liam's arms. "You guys can help the boat, right? I mean you saw, Al, Marius is going to be out of commission for a while trying to heal that eye of his."

Peter blinked but nodded, before joining in. "I saw that from afar, Tino is really amazing-" he smiled before frowning once he looked at Liam, who passed out just after Peter spoke. "-Did he?..." A worried look etched itself across Peter's face and Matthew shook his head.

"Just unconscious." Matthew confirmed and Peter let out a sigh of relief as did Alfred.

"Are you sure you can handle taking him home?" Alfred questioned Matthew awkwardly who had to hold Liam on his back. Usually the situation would have been reversed, hell, Matthew was sure Liam had all of them on his back at least once (usually kicking and screaming the whole way.). Still, Matthew hoisted Liam the best he could and looked back at his brothers.

"I can-" Matthew nodded but stopped when the engine to the boat suddenly sprung to life and the propellers slowly started to spin. "Don't worry, if I don't meet you guys again in the water, I'll for sure be back on the land before too long." He told them confidently.

"I don't like this." Alfred admitted.

"I know, but someone has to watch the boat just in case. We *have* to make sure those kids get home."

"I know, I just don't like it."

With that they went their separate ways. Alfred and Peter stayed with the boat while Matthew took off for home, at a painstakingly slow pace with Liam on his back like a cape. Matthew kept a sharp eye out, looking every which way, he wasn't going to be ambushed, he couldn't afford to be.

"Don't worry, Liam. We'll be home before you know it." Matthew told his unconscious brother. Obviously, Liam didn't respond, but that didn't stop Matthew from continuing this one sided conversation. "I just hope Dad'll be there." Matthew frowned. "I actually really hope he's okay, you know? With everything that's been happening, no doubt this is hard on him as well, probably even harder..." Matthew just sighed as he said it. "I hope he can help set things straight... or put Marius in some sort of magic straight jacket. That helps too."

Off in the distance Matthew could see the rusted fallen ship that he called home. He smiled a little, it felt familiar, it felt safe. His chest swell with a bit of happiness, he wanted nothing more than to rush there and yell for his dad, but he kept his pace slow, he didn't want to jostle Liam around too much.

"Where is he?"

It's really a shame that Matthew never got to go home, maybe if he did rush and risk injuring Liam more, then maybe...

Matthew was slow turning around to face Marius. Matthew felt stunned and at a loss for words as he shook his head dumbly. "Who?"

It seemed Marius never did get a chance to heal that eye of his, the most he seemed to do was just heal the area, it was inflamed but no longer burnt, the eye itself was white in color, Tino really did blind him. Marius clenched his fists. "Petru!" Marius spat in rage. "I won't ask you again!" his hands started to glow and Matthew backed up, putting a protective hand on Liam.

"I don't know!"

"... Of course you wouldn't know." Surprisingly Marius backed off, but Matthew refused to relax. "Perhaps I've been too kind over these last years. I never went after his children aside from today." Marius started to ramble on and Matthew debated on making a run for it. "Sure, I've attacked Liam, but never once *harmed* him, and Peter? It was a contract! The fool came to *me*... that was my fault. Clearly."

"Please-"

"I know you don't know where Petru is, why would *you* go after Petru." Marius cut Matthew off. "But you know who *would* go after Petru? Arthur."

Matthew kept his mouth clamped shut and tried to back up. All of his senses telling him to just *run*. "I don't know where Arthur went, but knowing that dirty bastard he went for the land, thinking I can't track him down. I can, but it takes so much time... too much time."

Marius looked... crazed. Matthew realized as he watched his movements. Marius was making big gestures with his arms with every word he spoke, not only that but he was talking to Matthew a little *too* calmly given the situation.

"I don't have that much time, I'm afraid."

"Marius-" Matthew knew he should have booked it, but it was too little too late as Marius's magic wrapped tightly around his neck. Unfortunately, this caused him to drop Liam, who didn't wake. "Please..." Matthew almost begged as he tried to grab at the magic around his throat.

"-But with *you* and Liam as bait, I don't need to track him down. He'll come to me."

Chapter End Notes

For most of this chapter, I was listening to Villian by K/DA and I have to say it does fit Marius somewhat.

The final hours part one

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The moment they finally managed to dock the boat everyone knew their troubles were only just starting. The Coast Guard boarded first, not the police. They then, not so politely, informed *everyone* that no one would be leaving the ship until they checked it for explosives.

Tino remembered yelling some not-so-nice things to them in Finnish. "-Of course, you guys are just so bored you had to make something up-"

Berwald had to pull Tino back after that, however the damage had been done by that point and one Coast Guard decided to hang back. Honestly, Berwald feared a fight and just kept his hold on Tino tight. "-Are you a part of the branch?" The coastal guard had questioned.

This man was tall, almost Berwald's height, he had blonde hair that was spiked up, almost reminding Berwald of Andersen. This man had blue eyes and a small scar above his right eyebrow. He just looked amused as he leaned back and let his buddies search around.

"I am." Tino curtly answered. "Marine."

The man smirked. "So, do the kiddies have crayons? Or did you eat them all?"

"Why you-" Berwald, once again, had to pull Tino back. "-At least I got the luxury of firing a gun after boot camp!" Tino shot back.

"Maybe- like- don't yell at the guys trying to save us, Tino?" Feliks made a point to join in as he stood between the two of them.

"They're nothing more than a bunch of Puddle Pirates!" Tino yelled in his defense.

That elicited a giggle from Gilbert. The coast guard in question didn't look so thrilled.

"Wow, did you use all two of your brain cells for that insult?"

"I don't know, did you join the Coast Guard because being in the Navy scared you?"

"They say strength is required to be a marine, but *clearly*..."

"Hey. At least people know that we're actually a *branch*! Most people think you're just glorified cops!"

"Oookay!" Feliks clapped his hands together suddenly catching everyone's attention.

"Tensions are high, Tino can you please, *please, please* stop insulting the men trying to save us. Home is just... *right there*." Feliks pointed down to the docks where the police and parents were eagerly waiting for them to come down.

Tino sucked in a slow breath through his nose but backed off just as well. "Fine..." He chewed on the inside of his cheek and Berwald exhaled a slow breath he didn't even know he had been holding. Still, Berwald noticed the tiny smile on the Coast Guard's face as he walked away from them. "Bunch of shallow water sailors, those lot." Tino grumbled to himself as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Just calm down. It's almost over and there's no need to get so worked up." Berwald softly spoke as he pulled Tino into his arms. Tino let out an angry 'hmpf.' in response.

"Sorry, it's just... after what we've all been through today... what I've seen..." Tino trailed off and rubbed his neck. Not the back of his neck, but the front. Something he's been doing since he got out of the water.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Berwald asked in a low whisper before he placed his chin on top of Tino's head. He felt Tino shake his head.

"No. Not here anyways. Not with the children."

"I tried to get to you, I really did-"

"I know... I'm just ready for this nightmare to be over." Tino mumbled into Berwald's chest as he rested his head. "Why are they even searching for a bomb in the first place? If there were a bomb you'd think it would have gone off by now."

"I know, this does seem strange, but just let them do their jobs, and please stop taking jabs at them."

Tino only chuckled a little at that. Eventually he pulled away from Berwald and looked out over the water. He didn't want to look at the crowd, it just made his anxiety spike. So, he just watched the water as it moved restlessly. He could only smile to himself as he saw a blue tail lightly splash up, to anyone else it would look like a dolphin, but he knew better.

'What if that mad man comes back?' Tino rubbed the front of his neck and winced at the memory that flooded his mind. It had all happened so fast, but Tino still remembered everything that had taken place.

Tino cried out underwater as he tried to kick at whatever had his foot, but that did nothing as a hand suddenly clamped tightly around his neck and he was face to face with the bastard.

This man looked impatient, frazzled, worried, the works. His teeth were gnashed tightly together and Tino saw his fangs. His hair moved with the current and Tino couldn't help but feel that he had met this guy before. Then the man's eyes started to glow.

All of Tino's instincts came flooding back and he tried to kick at the man, but he just couldn't reach his- his tail.

Yes, Berwald confirmed his suspicions but seeing it for himself... he just couldn't believe it. This merman had his grip tight on Tino's neck, not tight enough to choke him, but tight enough to where Tino couldn't wiggle out of.

Tino tried to claw at this guy's hands with his nails, but it did nothing. Tino knew just by looking into this guy's eyes, he was on a mission and wasn't going to stop until he got what he wanted. It was all so strange, Tino, for just a moment, saw himself in this man, it was odd and almost impossible to explain, but Tino knew what he was seeing. Underneath this man's frazzled and stressed look, Tino saw worry and grief.

Shame Tino couldn't focus on it for too long. Before he knew it something had struck his chest.

For Tino his body turned cold and he felt helpless in that moment. If he had any breath it was torn right out of his body, he wanted to scream but he couldn't even do that. This man was extracting something from Tino's body. It didn't hurt, but it wasn't exactly a pleasant experience. Tino's body almost felt like it was vibrating, he felt like he was leaving his body.

*'The flare... it's in my pocket...' He knew a flare could be used as protection, and if worse came to worse he could even use it as a weapon. Tino felt his fight start to leave his body, no, it was more than his fight. This man... was taking a part of Tino. Not a body part, but, Tino was sure in these final moments of his, this man was slowly taking his **soul**. There was a light leaving his body and Tino knew without a doubt that it was his soul that this man was collecting into the palm of his outstretched hand. 'I'm going to die down here...'*

Would he? Or would he still be living just without a body?

Tino's mind was starting to fog. He knew it wouldn't be much longer now. He had to do something, anything, he let his hands drop down to his sides. He watched it; amazed at how his own soul seemed to flow effortlessly, guided by an invisible force into this monster's hand. It was almost mesmerizing.

'No! I didn't come this far just to die!' Tino tried, dear god, did he try to kick and free himself, but his legs were like bricks and he was starting to see double.

Tino Väinämöinen was many things. A marine, a devoted teacher and husband, an unfortunate Vilomah, but he wasn't and will never be a quitter. If he was going to die today, then he wasn't going to go down without a fight! With what little strength, and willpower he had left, Tino reached into his pocket and pulled out the waterproof flare he had snatched earlier. 'If I don't do anything then the children...'

It was then that two things happened almost back to back. One: A net came down upon them. This had startled the merman and Tino's soul was more than happy to return to his body in an instant. Two: Tino's shoulders were grabbed by a pair of strong arms and before he knew it he was untangled from the net just in time as the net tightened around the merman.

*'Blind him! Cripple him, before he has time to hurt the children!' It was like a lightning flash, Tino didn't even need to think about what he wanted to do next. He twisted the cap of the flare off and a bright red explosive light surrounded him enough to see two other mermen. Twins. One on both sides of him. Tino didn't hesitate and before he was grabbed and hauled to the surface, he jammed the flames right into the red merman's eye. Even though he was under water, Tino **heard** this man's scream of pain.*

It wasn't a normal scream of pain, this was a shriek that rang through the waters that let every creature in the water know he was in extreme pain. Then, before Tino could go for the other eye, both of his arms were grabbed and he was forced to drop his flare. From there he was helped up to the surface.

"-Alright." The main Puddle Pirate came up to Tino and the children, forcing Tino out of his thoughts. "We searched this area top to bottom, no explosives to be found. With that you're all free to exit off and go to your loved ones. Please do so in an orderly fashion-."

"You heard the man; line up. Single file." Feliks bluntly ordered and the children did so. They were all practically vibrating with excitement, no doubt ready to just get off of this god forsaken boat-

"-Except for you five." Tino was ready to start throwing hands when he pointed to all of the adults. "We have questions. Don't worry about the children, my men will lead them down to safety."

Tino was ready to start fighting again, but Feliks elbowed him below the ribs. "Don't make me duct tape your mouth shut." Feliks hissed in Tino's ear. That shut him up, for now.

"Feliciano, just go, it'll be alright." Gilbert tried to get Feliciano in line. Tino turned towards the commotion and saw Feliciano holding on to Ludwig's arm for dear life. It took about two seconds for Tino to realize what the problem was. With Gilbert already on the ship, Ludwig had no reason to leave his brother behind. If Ludwig wasn't leaving the ship then neither was Feliciano.

That was when Tino decided to step in to get his mind off of the coastal guards for now. "Feli?" Tino came over and squatted down so he and Feliciano were eye to eye. "Don't you want to see Eliza or Roderich?" Tino peeked up to the crowd of people, he actually couldn't see Eliza or Roderich, but he did see Lovino front and center doing what he does best, giving some poor fellow hell. "Look, it's Lovino." Tino pointed and Feliciano frowned, but followed where Tino was pointing.

"I'll be damned, it is him." Gilbert snickered suddenly as he leaned off the side of the ship. "I feel sorry for that poor bastard he's yelling at."

"Mr. Beilschmidt." Tino stood and put his hands on his hips. "Language, please."

"My bad, teach." Gilbert shamefully ducked his head down. "Still, Feli, don't you want to see Lovino? He seems worried about you."

"Of course I want to see him." Feliciano stated matter of factly and even seemed to be mimicking Tino as he put his hands on his hips in the same fashion. Gilbert suppressed a snicker, and Tino shot the man a look. "But..." Any confidence Feliciano had melted away in an instant as he suddenly looked unsure. "I don't want Ludwig to stay on the boat... Not with what's in the water."

Tino almost forgot that Feliciano knew just what was in the water. Tino tucked some of his hair behind his ear and squatted right back down. His knees popped in protest, but he ignored

it. "Feliciano, I know your concerns, don't worry. I'm very aware of *what's* in the water as well. I saw it first hand, but the boat is docked. I don't think the man in red-

"- Marius." Ludwig cut Tino off suddenly and this made Tino look at him with a wide-eyed stare.

"W-What?"

"His name." Gilbert filled Tino in. "Is Marius." He then shoved a hand into his pocket and chewed on the inside of his cheek. "He's one mean Mothertrucker."

"I appreciate the censorship. Yes, he is." Tino rubbed his neck once more before sighing and looking at Feliciano. "Feliciano, I don't think Marius will be coming back anytime soon."

Feliciano looked at Ludwig and frowned. "But what if he does?"

"... Look around you, Feli. Look at all the people out there, all those parents, the cops, the coastal guards. Marius would be incredibly stupid to try something now. You have nothing to worry about."

Feliciano held strong for about a minute before his shoulders slumped, he either didn't have a comeback or was out of fight. "Okay... I guess you make a point...."

"That's a good boy." Tino smiled and ruffled Feliciano's hair a bit. "Now, go and see your brother, I'm sure he, along with Eliza and Roderich, are worried sick about you." Feliciano smiled a small little smile. It did the trick and off Feliciano went running after the other students down to the docks.

"You five. Here. now." The coastal guard demanded.

"Stay here. Okay?" Gilbert simply asked of Ludwig. Ludwig nodded obediently. Tino and Gilbert rushed to the guard in question. Soon, all five of them were around him.

"To start off, I'm Petty Officer Abel-" Tino's eyes instantly darted to Abel's badge, it checked out. "-The reason we asked for you five to stay behind is simple. We were told there would be only two adults, maybe three counting the captain, but there are five, and don't think we didn't see that little boat tied up."

All of them looked at each other for a moment before Berwald spoke up first.

"It's simple, us three-" He pointed to Gilbert, Kiku, and himself. "Were worried, so we thought we'd look for the boat ourselves."

"No boats were permitted to leave the docks."

"We didn't get off at the dock..." Gilbert mumbled.

"I see..." Abel took out a small notebook and started to write this information down. "So, how did you three find the fishing boat? It must have been far if *we* couldn't even find it."

There was more silence, they didn't want to give away their secret and even though Tino didn't know it himself, he had to agree with them on this. Kiku was the next to speak. "This is my brother's boat. I know all of his fishing spots."

You could have heard a pin drop as Abel just looked at Kiku with a raised eyebrow. Immediately he was suspicious. "This is your brother's boat?"

"*Hai.*"

"What's your name again?"

"Kiku Honda." Kiku crossed his arms and looked uncomfortable as he was visibly worried.

"And Yao Wang is your brother?"

"*Hai...*"

"Why do you have different last names?"

"Does that really have to do with anything?" Gilbert came to Kiku's aid and Abel's mouth thinned into a line.

"Yes. It does."

"We're half-brothers. We have different fathers, if you *must* know." Kiku spoke professionally, but it wasn't lost on Tino that there was a bit of snark in those words.

"I see." Abel scribbled all of this down in his handy-dandy notebook. "Now, how did the three of you get together exactly?"

That was a question Tino was wanting to know himself. Berwald answered first. "Tino is my husband-"

"-And Ludwig was on the ship-." Gilbert cut in, tossing a look behind him to look at his brother.

"-Gilbert is my neighbor." Kiku finished up. "And also... Yao being my brother and all."

Abel didn't look impressed as he wrote this all down. Kiku caught Gilbert's eyes for a moment and saw Gilbert shifting his eyes to the water for just a second before looking back at Abel. '*He's worried. Of course, look at this place.*' Everywhere Kiku looked he realized there were Coastal guards *everywhere*. No matter which way he looked, there was another boat. How were the others going to discreetly get back to the land? '*Be safe.*'

Knowing there was no way they could get out of the water on the docks, or with their respected friends/family. They both decided to find a clearing at the beach and get their legs back. Alfred had to be sneaky as he snatched their bagged clothes back off of Kiku's boat. Matthew's and Liam's included. He tied the plastic bags tightly and prayed the water wouldn't leak in.

It wasn't until he felt something oddly heavy in Peter's bag did he stop and look at his brother.
"Peter?"

"Hm?"

"What is this?" Alfred shook the bag and the heavy thing hung at the bottom of the bag next to Peter's shoes. It was long, hard, and looked sharp enough to pierce the bag, but it wasn't a knife.

"A chisel." Peter just said that so casually. Like he was just explaining it was his socks or something mundane.

"Peter?"

"Hm?"

"Why on earth do you have a chisel with you?"

"Safety precaution."

"..." The wheel spun in Alfred's mind as he stared at the little chisel inside of the semi-opaque bag. Then it clicked. "You had a *weapon* this whole time and didn't use it?!"

Peter stuck his tongue out. "Obviously. I forgot about it at home and I couldn't take it with me when I turned back in a merman."

"Why not?" Alfred felt his eyebrows knit together as he handed the bag back to Peter. Peter frowned and checked the bag for himself.

"Do you really think Liam would let me travel with something sharp?"

"Hm... good point."

"Also, I stole it from Berwald." With that last declaration Peter went back under the water.

"What?!" Alfred huffed out a laugh. "Little hellion." He rolled his eyes and went under once he was sure his bag was tightly sealed to the best of his abilities. It didn't take long for him to catch up to Peter.

The two of them kept the pace brisk, while Alfred kept casually looking behind him.

"Matthew still isn't back." Alfred commented to Peter after a few minutes of this. Peter shrugged it off.

"You saw how banged up Liam looked. Besides, Alfred did say he'd meet up with us later on the land."

"I literally just called him-" Alfred just sucked in a deep breath and dropped it. "Doesn't matter. You have a point. I'm sure he'll be behind us shortly. C'mon, let's just find a clearing on the beach."

They steered clear of any boats and swam around until they were sure they found a decent clearing. Alfred popped up to the surface first. Seeing a boulder nearby he crawled up it and looked up and over at the beach. He heard Peter come up just behind him.

"... Is that... Dad?!" Alfred gasped out loudly and Peter let out his own gasp. Alfred had to rub his eyes just to make sure he wasn't seeing things. He *wasn't* seeing things. Just a little ways away from where they were sitting, was his dad. He was up and walking around on two legs- as well as fully clothed, but he wasn't alone.

"Oh my god, that's Lillie- *Lillie!*?" Alfred couldn't stop his yelling and Lillie whipped her head around at the mention of her name. She, like their father, was up and *walking on two legs*. Unlike their dad, however, it seemed she was only clothed in a shirt that just barely covered what it needed to. "Alfie and- Peter! *Peter!*" Lillie let out a happy cry that echoed across the ocean, and that got their father's attention.

And that's when Alfred saw there was a third person with them.

"Uh-oh..." Peter muttered suddenly and ducked down into the water a little "It's Lukas."

"Lukas- wait! Like *Uncle* Lukas!?" Now *that's* a name Alfred never thought he'd hear again.

"Peter and Alfred- or Matthew- You two get your butts over here! *Now!*" Their dad immediately scolded as he yelled at them from where he was standing on the beach.

"Oh great, now look at what you did." Peter grumbled.

"C'mon Peter, you knew you couldn't avoid him forever."

"I was just hoping I could; on the *land* of all things." And with that Peter went back under and went for the surface.

Alfred just sighed. "Me too..."

The first words out of Arthur's mouth wasn't if they were alright, but rather something else that chilled Alfred. "Where is Matthew and Liam? I need all hands on deck here."

"They're not with you?" Peter asked as he dragged himself farther onto the land.

"Do you *see* them with me?" Their dad demanded as he moved his arms out to prove his point.

"...Liam was hurt-" Alfred found himself saying, his last words to his father haunting him- taunting him almost. He'd apologize later, their dad and Lukas needed to know the situation at hand. "-Marius, he found us guarding the boat-" Alfred started following Peter's example and trying to claw his way on to the sandy shore. "-He bound me, knocked Peter out, and struck Matthew down all within seconds." Alfred grunted as he tried to now wiggle on to the land to get away from the water.

Lukas came over now and got down on one knee in front of Alfred. That was when he offered a hand. Alfred took it and was relieved when Lukas pulled him away from the water

with ease. "Dammit. That means-" Arthur muttered.

"The barrier wasn't connected to him." Lukas finished as he started to pace around. "He still went after the boat... is it...?" Lukas stopped his pacing and looked at Alfred. Alfred didn't know how to answer that question.

"He's asking if everyone is dead." a new voice came in and Alfred whipped his head around to look at... somebody that looked vaguely familiar to him. Alfred felt his face scrunch up a little as he tried to place who this child was. Thankfully, he didn't have to think about it too much as Lukas said:

"Emil, you don't have to be so crude."

Alfred only chuckled before turning serious. "No. The boat is safely docked, last we saw the coastal guard was questioning the adults on the situation." Lukas let out a little exhale that he's clearly been holding in for some time.

"Thank goodness."

"Yeah, Uncle Lukas, you should have seen Tino!" Peter wiggled in place as he tried to get his tail to dry out. "He was a badass! I think he blinded Marius with a flare!"

Lukas made an uneasy face, but at what?

"Wait a minute! Peter, why didn't you tell us you were close to Uncle Lukas!" Alfred suddenly yelled at his brother. "If we would have known that we could have had some sort of help!"

"I'm afraid not." Lukas sighed. "Marius had Emil, I've been in the water all day trying to free him."

"Yes, and I see you both did that... but why are you on the land?" Alfred finally asked as he turned to his dad and Lillie. It was then did Alfred see that Lillie had someone in her arms. The merperson's upper half was out, but their tail was wrapped in a soaked T-shirt. "Lillie... who is that?" Alfred's stomach turned cold as he felt suddenly ill. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like the answer.

"It's Petru..."

"...Oh."

Arthur came over and touched Alfred's tail. "Now you see why this is a 'all hands on deck' situation?" Arthur asked as his hands glowed and before Alfred knew it his legs were back. He swiftly went to put his clothes on. As Arthur went to Peter.

Lillie was nice enough to look away as Alfred jumped up and down into his pants. Still, Alfred looked over his shoulder to look at her for just a moment. She seemed to be in one of Arthur's shirts, as mentioned before, it just hardly covered what it needed to. Alfred didn't like the idea of his sister running around practically half-naked.

Alfred went back to dressing himself, thinking of what he could give his sister. Peter was up now and getting dressed just as well. "Thank you, sweetheart." Alfred looked back over his shoulder to see Arthur grabbing Petru from Lillie's arms. Lillie immediately started to roll her arms in her sockets.

"Is what Liam said true?" Alfred's mouth moved before he could stop it. Arthur's head snapped to attention at that.

"I'm afraid... I'm afraid you're going to have to be more specific, love." Arthur had an obvious wince when he spoke.

"You cursed Petru by taking his magic away."

"...Yes."

"And... did you try and give that magic to me when I was younger?"

"...Yes..."

"So you still have it?!"

"Yes."

"Then just pop it back into Petru and let's end this petty fight between Marius and yourself!"

Arthur sighed. "I wish it were that simple, Alfred. Unfortunately because of what Marius has been doing to keep Petru alive, I have to extract all the souls inside of him in order to give him his magic back-" Alfred opened his mouth, but Arthur cut him off. "-I know- I know what you're thinking. No, I can't give him his magic back with all of these souls inside of him. I don't know how that would work. I don't want to risk killing him, do you understand me?"

Alfred shut his mouth and nodded.

"We need a place to stay." Lukas came in. "My home is out of the option as Marius ambushed me there already. It'd be the first place he'd look."

"..." Alfred looked over his shoulder at Kiku's home. It was just right. There. But to do so without permission was rather rude...

"Heeeey!" A voice suddenly yelled out from the ocean. For a moment Alfred thought that it was Matthew, but quickly realized the voices didn't match; before he turned to see who had called. He saw Kiku's boat approaching, but Kiku wasn't driving it. Gilbert was. Not a good sign.

Gilbert was pretty skilled driving the boat up to the shore. He killed the engine once he was sure it was good and stuck on the sand, something Kiku will be cursing about later down the line. Gilbert jumped down onto the shore, Ludwig in tow. Gilbert stopped mid-step once he saw Arthur. He nearly fell to the ground with how suddenly he stopped.

The air turned tense within seconds as the two just stared at one another with wide-eyes. Gilbert's chest was moving up and down as his breathing turned heavy. Arthur, on the other hand, looked ready to straight up flee. This was the first time Alfred saw his father look so... afraid of someone.

Sharks? Basically guppies.

Marius? Just a pest.

Gilbert? Terrifying, apparently.

Gilbert bit his lip before turning to Alfred. Clearly opting to ignore Arthur. "Hey, Kiku's been detained."

"What?" Alfred gasped. "What did he do?"

"It's not what he did, It's because he's related to Yao. I don't know exactly, but they took him away."

"Dammit, I'm not going to begin to think I understand everything, but this doesn't sound good..."

"It's not. He's in the cops custody now and unfortunately, there's nothing we can do about it." Arthur suddenly chimed in, he looked uneasy as he spoke.

"Yeah, well, Kiku gave me permission to bring his boat here, but I'm going back up into town here in a moment. It's.... Somewhere between a party and a riot.... Where's Matt?" Gilbert suddenly stopped and looked around once he realized Matthew wasn't with the rest of them.

Peter chimed in. "Had to break away, he'll be back soon enough-"

"-Do you still live in that house over there?" Arthur suddenly spoke up as he pointed towards Gilbert's home. Gilbert's face turned uncomfortable and it wasn't lost on Alfred when he saw Gilbert, either consciously or subconsciously, pull Ludwig closer.

Then they stared at each other and it grew uncomfortable as the seconds ticked. "Look-" Gilbert spoke in a low and almost solemn tone. "-Just because I haven't decked you yet, doesn't mean you can come to me with requests." Gilbert kept the bite in his tone. "...Just because I'm dating Matthew, doesn't mean squat... just because both Matthew and Liam vow your innocence... Just because I've seen Marius's shapeshifting first hand..." Gilbert's hands tightened into fists as his voice became more emotional. "Doesn't make us friends! Do you hear me, Arthur!?"

Arthur let out a soft noise before turning his head shamefully. "I'm sorry." He said so suddenly that, well, everyone stopped and just looked at him. He sounded so... defeated? Sad?

It was a tone that Alfred had never heard his father use before, and apparently, neither had Lukas by the wide-eyed and shocked stare he was giving Arthur.

Arthur's voice shook when he spoke next. "Gilbert, I'm not asking you to befriend me, I'm not even asking you to forgive me! I'm just seeking *help*. Gilbert-" Arthur, with no other choice, presented Petru to Gilbert. "-This is Petru... I can *fix* him. I can stop Marius's killings, I can fix *something*. I just need some help."

Gilbert didn't move, he hardly blinked. Gilbert then approached Petru and looked at him. "...This will stop the killings?" Gilbert tilted his head as he watched Petru for several moments.

"Yes, but we need a safe place, Marius will come looking and we can't go to Lukas's-"

"The kid still has his tail... won't he die if he's out of the water for too long?"

Arthur made a noise of surprise, as did Lukas. "Y-You know?" Arthur asked

"I told you, I saw Marius's powers up close, well, that and Matthew showed me."

"I see... to answer your question, I would turn him human if I could. His body is rejecting magic, so, this is why I'm asking to do this at your home. We could place him in your tub-"

"-I have no water. I haven't paid the bill yet."

Arthur actually let out a sort of rueful chuckle at that. "Are you still working at that pizza restaurant?" Gilbert blushed at this, but didn't engage. So, Arthur just shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We're so close to the beach, as long as we keep his tail wet with the ocean water, he'll be fine."

"Just so you know...I told myself if I ever saw you again I'd kill you myself."

"I believe you."

Alfred suddenly tensed as did Lillie and Lukas.

"I never thought I'd be handing you the keys to my damn house. That's for sure" Gilbert sighed out and shook his head as he reached into his pocket and helded his keys out for Arthur to take. Arthur actually hesitated as he reached out but stopped just before grabbing the keys.

Alfred saw it, for just a short moment in his father's eyes. His usual grumpy shell cracked for a moment and a sort of happiness shone in his eyes, but, as this was Arthur, it was only for a second before he returned. "Thank you." He gently took the keys from Gilbert's hand.

"Just stop these *verdammt* killings-" Gilbert then took off in a jog and Ludwig followed right behind his brother. "-And don't burn my house down!"

"Hold up-" Alfred called as he immediately went after Gilbert.

"Wait!" Peter was right behind Alfred.

"Al-" Lillie grabbed him by his sleeve, suddenly making him stop. When he stopped Peter did as well. "Don't go, we just got you two back!" She begged.

"I have to go! Kiku, he's important to me!"

"Yeah, and I want to make sure Berwald and Tino are alright!" Peter chimed in. "They were on the boat."

"But-" Lillie started to tear up and Alfred immediately felt like someone had socked him right in the chest. He hated making Lillie cry.

Then the impossible happened: "Let him go, Lillie." Arthur spoke up in a stern voice. He looked over his shoulder and at Alfred and for just a moment they were on the same level. There was a look in Arthur's eyes, like, he understood what Alfred was going through. "He and Peter would just be in the way." That's what he had said, but his eyes were saying something different: *'Do what I couldn't.'*

Lillie hesitated and let him go. "Come back safely, alright?" She asked in a slightly shaky voice.

Alfred nodded. "Of course- oh, and Dad?"

Arthur turned his head over his shoulder once again.

"- I love you." Alfred took off before he could hear Arthur's reply.

Most of the people congregated away from the docks and moved a little more uptown, away from the boats, but not away from the water as they were just above the ocean wall, the only thing separating them from an unpleasant, and long dive into the sea, was railing.

"-Can you tell us about what happened?!" A news reporter (A leech, Tino dubbed them) shoved a microphone in Tino's face. "How are you taking this?!"

"No comment." Tino sweated as he pushed past the woman just as another microphone was shoved in his face. Tino, this time more out of reflex, jerked his arm up, knocking the microphone out of the other reporter's hand. "No comment!" He snarled before the man could even ask.

Everyone wanted to talk to him, and the thing was, Tino didn't want to talk. He just wanted to go home! He just wanted to rest, dammit. "Tino!" It was like a little voice from the heavens as Peter came barreling towards him. Tino suddenly smiled and ran towards Peter.

"Peter! I'm so happy to see you!" Tino's day looked just a little brighter. He quickly wrapped his arms around Peter's tiny frame. Tino scrunched his nose up at the smell of the ocean that seemed to be radiating off of Peter.

"I'm happy to see you too. I heard about the boat, are you okay?"

Tino smiled and ruffled Peter's blonde hair. "I am now." Tino felt it strange that Peter's hair was wet, in fact, it was dripping still, and he seemed out of breath like he'd been running.

"Tino- Oh." Berwald came up from behind Tino and actually looked surprised to see Peter standing there. "Peter...Where's Andersen?"

Peter looked at Berwald like he grew two heads, and for a moment Tino wanted to do so himself. "O-Oh!" Peter blinked back into reality. "I...I lost him in the crowd! Yeah! He vanished on me!"

Tino wanted to be mad at Andersen, but for some reason he couldn't. Mainly because he didn't know Andersen was supposed to be watching Peter, Berwald never mentioned it to Tino, but there was something else just nagging in the back of Tino's mind. Maybe it was Peter's sopping wet hair, the smell of the ocean, the panicked look in his eye, or maybe...just maybe, it was because the longer Tino felt himself staring at Peter, the more a thought crept into his mind. That thought being: *'He looks a lot like those twins...'*

"Mr. Väinämöinen?" It was Ivan's voice that brought him back. He looked over his shoulder.

"Chief Braginsky." Tino lightly dipped his head in respect as Ivan approached.

"I'm glad to see you and all of the children are in good health. I won't lie, This situation had me worried." Ivan let out a sigh. He looked from Tino, to Berwald, then to Peter. Tino watched as Ivan did a complete double take at Peter. Peter went over to Tino and held on to his hand while watching Ivan cautiously.

"Now, who are you?" Ivan got down on one knee to look at Peter.

"... Andersen didn't tell you about Peter?" Tino didn't know why *that* was the first thing out of his mouth, but it was.

"Peter?" Ivan kept his face stoic, his voice steady, but his eyes were flashing a look that Tino didn't like. "Now isn't that funny." Ivan scratched at his chin.

Tino pulled Peter in close. "And why would that be funny?" Tino questioned, Berwald came over and put both of his hands on Tino's shoulders. Keeping him at bay for now.

"Well... I just happen to know someone who's missing a little brother by the name of Peter."

Tino looked down at Peter once it was said. Tino knew he *should* be surprised by this revelation, but he knew that he was just fooling himself into thinking that Peter wasn't a lost child. No, he wasn't surprised, but he soon became aware of the anger that was building up inside of him. At Peter? No, Peter was just a child and obviously never meant to hurt them, no, he realized he was growing angry at Andersen.

"Andersen never told us." Tino found himself saying after a few moments of silence.

Ivan tilted his head. "Andersen knew?"

Tino snorted and crossed his arms over his chest and Berwald's hands just lightly tightened on Tino's shoulders. That was apparently all the confirmation Ivan needed as he just snorted through his nose before saying: "I see... I'll have to talk to Andersen about this next time I see him... but for the time being, Peter, can I ask you a question?"

Peter looked uncomfortable but remained polite. "I guess?"

"Have you come into contact with Matthew or Liam? They both went missing."

It wasn't just Peter who visibly tensed, it was also Berwald as his hands suddenly grew uncomfortably tight against Tino's shoulders. This made Tino wiggle uncomfortably.

"...No. I haven't seen either of them." Peter whispered while keeping his head down not looking Ivan in the eye. This wasn't lost on Ivan, the lack of eye contact.

"Are you sure, little one? You aren't in any trouble, even if you had spoken to them." Ivan pried.

Tino got ready to defend Peter and to shoo Ivan away, but to his credit, Peter jerked his head up and looked Ivan dead in the eyes. "I haven't seen Matthew or Liam as of late."

Ivan hummed before ruffling Peter's hair. "I see. Well, thank you for being honest. I'll have to talk to Iryna about doing a home visit, you know. Protocol." He looked at Tino and Berwald. "But for now I have other parents to attend to."

"Right..." Tino couldn't help but grumble softly as Ivan turned his back and left. Berwald exhaled a breath he's been holding in and instantly Tino turned around and looked at Berwald. "The truth. Now." Tino growled between clenched teeth as he got up into Berwald's face.

"Not in public." Berwald's voice was soft as he tried to keep Tino calm. "I promise, Tino. We'll explain everything, just not here, not now."

Tino looked at Peter and Peter ducked his head down guiltily.

Tino just stared as the wheels in his head started to turn and grind against each other, and that was when everything just seemed to *click* in place for Tino. Why Peter looked so much like those twins that saved Tino, because they were *brothers*. Peter was *one of them*. That was why he was so wet and reeked of ocean water.

It was like someone had just smacked Tino in the face. His emotions turned conflicting. He was happy, happy to know the truth and what Peter was hiding, oddly blessed that Peter had chosen him and Berwald to stay with, but at the same time, he felt a bit of anger bubble in the very pit of his stomach. He felt... betrayed in a weird sense. *'I don't know if it's the shock of learning he does in fact have a family, or the shock of learning about what he was...is? He was in the water... does he know about Sven? Was he part of it- Stop it, Tino! Peter is just a kid!- But you've seen how fast they are- Did he grab Sven?'*

"Tino-" Berwald came over and put a hand on Tino's shoulder, but for once Tino jerked away from his beloved husband.

"-No!" Tino suddenly hissed. "You can't just expect me to be okay with...with this bombshell!" Tino tried to keep his voice in a whisper so none of the other parents heard him. "And what's more, you *knew*."

"Yes." Berwald argued. "I knew. I only just found this out a couple of hours ago, and I get you're scared especially after what happened to you these last couple of hours, but Peter is harmless. He's just a child."

Tino scoffed, not at the notion, but at Berwald. "You don't think I see that? I'm upset, not blind. It's just..."

"I know. I *know*. Tino." Berwald lovingly cupped his hands against the sides of Tino's face. Tino relaxed a bit at Berwald's touch. "It's a lot to take in, but look at it from Peter's perspective. He's a little kid in a strange world and he came to *us* for support and help. Not only that, but he has an evil mer...wizard...? After him."

"..." Oh... *oh*.

"Why... didn't you *tell* me that?!" Tino blew up at Berwald and lightly pushed him back. "We can't let Peter out of our sights-..." Tino's anger shifted as he immediately whipped his head towards where Peter was standing...

Or rather where Peter *should* have been standing.

A nauseating sense of Deja Vu washed over Tino like a tidal wave when all he saw was an empty spot. Tino's whole body became so cold he felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water on him. "Peter...?"

In an instant, Tino snapped back and he started to scan the waves of people. "Peter!" He yelled out, catching some people's attention.

"Peter!?" Berwald's voice almost seemed to bellow around them like they were in an echo chamber of sorts.

Tino's heart started to hammer away viciously as he felt on the verge of a panic attack.

"No..." He put his hands on his head as his breath became erratic and the world slowed to a crawl as he scanned past the faceless people in the crowds. '*Not again, not again!*' Tino felt the tears prickle in the corners of his eyes.

That was when he heard it.

The unmistakable sound of a safety whistle being blown. He heard parents groan in pain, while others covered their ears at the obnoxious trill of the whistle. Tino did neither of those things. That was *Ludwig's* whistle. He instantly looked towards that direction only to see a flash of red. There were gasps and screams as some of the parents went running for safety

with their children in tow. The flash was so bright that out of instinct Tino shut his eyes. He felt arms suddenly pull him in close and he instantly knew it was Berwald.

Parents were still screaming in terror, someone knocked into Tino and Berwald, this made Tino reopen his eyes.

Tino truly wished he was dreaming right now, that he'd wake up and this day was one all prolonged nightmare induced by his trauma. Because as the day just kept going on it all seemed to get worse and *worse*. Seeing Peter being dangled above the ocean by a string of red light, threatening to fall any minute was enough to make Tino's blood boil, but seeing Ludwig go flying up in the air only seconds later- That made Tino see red and any thoughts of mercy or peace were pushed out of his mind as he charged for the man responsible.

Ludwig saw Matthew before Gilbert did, Gilbert actually focused on Antonio and Lovino and lightly broke away from Ludwig. Ludwig was more than happy to come up to Matthew, but he stopped just a few feet shy.

Ludwig knew something was off with 'Matthew' He just didn't look right. He didn't smile, talk, or be flustered like he usually would do. He looked unnaturally stoic and...looked just unnatural in general. It was hard for him to explain. But, what really tipped Ludwig off was the way Matthew had the blonde boy in his grip.

If this was Matthew's youngest brother then why did he have him tightly by the wrist like he didn't want him to escape. It wasn't until the young blonde boy looked up and his eyes were glowing red did Ludwig raise an alarm with his whistle. It was just an involuntary reaction on Ludwig's part. He didn't know how he knew, but this wasn't Matthew.

And Gilbert knew this as well. The moment he laid eyes on 'Matthew' when Ludwig blew his whistle, he didn't even hesitate, he charged and swung, but whoever this was anticipated such a blow. With a blast of light he sent Gilbert flying into Antonio. "Gilbert!" Ludwig cried and dropped his whistle as he went for his brother. There was another flash of light, maybe if Ludwig hadn't ignored the light he wouldn't have been grabbed. He didn't even know he was grabbed, all he knew was that something had his ankle and down he went. Ludwig gasped in shock when his chest hit the ground. "Gil-

The next thing Ludwig knew was that he was weightless as he was tossed high into the air. His breath was caught in his throat as he flew for just a few seconds. It wasn't until he reached the max height did he finally catch his breath as all he heard was his own gasp flood through his ears before gravity kicked in only a second later. That was when Ludwig screamed out. *'No! I-I have to be there for Feli!'* Ludwig thought of the mere idea of his impending death flooded his thoughts. There's no way he'd survive the fall, not at the height he seemed to be falling from. *'He...He **needs** me!'-'*

Something latched on to his neck, stopping his fall, but he wasn't out of the air. No, Ludwig looked down and saw the ocean just maybe two stories down. Ludwig looked up to see that Matthew didn't have him by the neck, but rather magic had him by the neck. Magic that was streaming from 'Matthew's' hands. One flow, two split streams.

Who was Ludwig kidding? This was Marius using Matthew's face without a doubt. There was a sick twisted smile on his face, showing off those fangs of his while his eyes glowed an unnatural shade of red. There was screaming from the parents, some were running towards the commotion, while others, the smarter ones, were taking their children and running for safety. Ludwig prayed Feliciano was out of there and heading for home.

Gilbert was up and on his feet, his fist clenched, ready to throw down any second. While the officers, be it coastal guard, or police officer, crowded around Matthew, guns drawn. Ready to shoot.

"Matthew?..." Officer Machado did not have his gun drawn, but he did have a hand on it, just in case, he was cautious in his approach.

Ludwig looked away and over towards Matthew's brother. He seemed... out of it. His eyes were open, but still that nasty shade of red, and he looked forward, but showed no emotion.

"Matthew-" Máximo approached, hand on his gun, but not drawn, not like the other officers around. Gilbert had to give Máximo some credit, even when posed as an actual threat, he was still hesitant to harm Matthew.

But this wasn't Matthew.

"No! It's not Mattie!" Gilbert barked at Máximo. "It's him, it's Marius! He's using Matthew as a disguise!"

"That-" Máximo growled, but Gilbert didn't let him finish.

"-Dammit, just *look* at him Máxi! Since when could Matthew shoot magic out of his hands!"

"I...I don't know! I'm learning *a lot* of new things about Matthew-" Máximo hissed between clenched teeth.

"-He's right." Gilbert's aid came in the form of Andersen as the man pushed past a couple of officers. He looked like he crawled out of hell and back, but there was still a sort of fire in his eyes. "That's not Matthew, that asshole posed as me last night!"

"Do you hear yourselves!?" Someone called out, but just as quickly someone else, Ivan, if Gilbert was right, yelled right back:

"Look at him! Look at what he's doing! Look at the *children*! Enough of this. Shoot to kill-"

A giggle. That giggle turned into a laugh and that laugh turned into...well... a creepy laugh.

Gilbert turned towards Marius. Matthew's form *melting* off of him as he *laughed*. He held on to his abdomen as he just continued to laugh at all of them. His face turning red as a blush graced his cheeks. Gilbert gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. Gilbert wasn't phased by this, he's seen it before, yeah, it was weird watching as his real face became revealed. Same couldn't be said for the others. Gilbert heard the sound of guns being lowered, gasps of awe and confusion, and also stifled screams of terror.

"What the fuck is so funny, asshole!" Gilbert snarled through clenched teeth. Then when Marius didn't stop laughing Gilbert switched to yelling. "You're outnumbered fifty to one! All guns are trained on *you*. If I were you I wouldn't be the one laughing!"

Gilbert wasn't a psychologist. He couldn't even pretend to know what was going on in Marius's demented mind, but he knew. That Marius was officially a man with nothing left to lose, Marius used to hide in the shadows, not draw attention to him, but now? Gilbert just felt uncomfortable when Marius's laughter finally started to die down and he finished it up with a happy little hum.

"Go ahead!" Marius spoke loudly and proudly and brought his arms out. "Shoot me, punch me, kill me if you must, but you all need to know something. You're not just snuffing my life out. You're hurting *them*." He gestured towards Ludwig and Peter.

Gilbert's stomach did flips. The children were connected by his magic. *'If he loses his grip... there's no way they'd survive that fall.'*

"You goddamned coward..." Tino spoke. He was to Marius's right. "You absolute coward!" Tino screamed in rage. "You'd hurt children to make yourself safe!"

"Maybe I am!" Marius screamed right back at Tino. "Because you know what? It doesn't end with just them!"

It was a statement that struck fear into everyone standing there as with a wave of his hands more bodies connected by magic rose to join the children. Seeing Matthew amongst those bodies, still in his merman form rise with Liam struck fear in Gilbert. Both of them looked... emotionally dead as they just stared blankly ahead. There was a third body someone Gilbert didn't recognize.

But Tino did.

"Eduard!"

It took both Berwald and Feliks to hold Tino back, he screamed and cried to be released but both of them had him in a weird triple hug making sure to keep him in place.

"So, *shoot me*! I dare you..."

Chapter End Notes

So, this was unintentional. I actually looked up what the name Marius means. It means "Sea." That was an accident, but a happy accident! It actually has several different meanings. For Latin it could mean "Sea" but it could also just mean "Male." Either way, pretty neat!

The final hours part two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"... Arthur... Is it possible that you could still extract Marius's magic?"

Arthur nearly dropped Petru at Lukas's question. Lukas stood in the doorway of the bathroom, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed tightly over his chest. He looked at Arthur with the utmost seriousness; expecting an answer.

Arthur sighed as he pondered the question over. "It depends." He turned his attention back to Petru. Arthur watched as the first soul, the bright orange one, pooled into the palm of his hand. It took little coaxing for the soul to remove itself from Petru. Arthur knew that these souls wouldn't put up a fight and would probably be more than happy to remove themselves from the host they were forced into.

"On what?" Lukas pressed.

"Factors... basics? Eh..." Arthur shook his head to clear his swarming thoughts for a moment. "I guess the easiest way to say it would be... Marius would either need to be unconscious or subdued, because he won't just willingly hand his magic over. You know that: To so much as to subdue him would take up a lot of magic, more than I can spare. I'm afraid. Between Petru and having to subdue him, *plus* extracting his magic from his body- which isn't easy-"

Lukas walked into the bathroom and got down next to Arthur. Lukas put a hand on Arthur's arm. Arthur looked up at Lukas, slightly confused by this sudden affection. Then he watched as Lukas used his own magic, not to take the first soul from Arthur, but to start on extracting the second soul beneath the first. "You forget, Arthur. I have magic as well."

"...but you never wanted to get involved-"

"That changed."

"..."

"Look, I'm just suggesting...If it *has* to come to it. If I can subdue him, keep him calm or tied, or unconscious...can you do it?"

"..." Arthur frowned as he turned away from Lukas. "Why? If taking magic is what started this all... why would you want me to take his?"

"Because... Do you think he's going to come with us *willingly*? Do you think he'll just let us up to his nest without a fight? He's dangerous right now and you know it! He needs his magic taken away if only for a short while."

"You...make a good point. I guess I didn't think about it that way."

"That's obvious..."

"I need to think about it."

"Not for too long, I hope..." Lukas suddenly let out a gasp making Arthur look at him. Lukas let go of the soul he was holding with his magic and the soul retreated back into Petru's body.

"You git." Arthur lightly scolded but Lukas wasn't phased by this as he just stared intensely at the soul that finished collecting in Arthur's hand. "Lukas?" Arthur tilted his head at Lukas in question.

Lukas reached his hands out, they were shaking. "C...can I hold that soul, please?" Lukas's usual emotionless facade broke in just a second as Arthur could see Lukas's eyes misting up with unshed tears. "*Please?*" Lukas's voice actually cracked as he almost begged.

"Uh...sure." Not knowing how to react. Arthur handed the soul over to Lukas. The moment the orange soul went into Lukas's hand Lukas let out a shuttered breath of shock.

"-I...I didn't want to believe it when I theorized that Marius took you..." Lukas was now talking to the soul. "I really didn't want to believe it when Emil told me that...you called him Emily... but... oh...oh Sven..." Lukas whispered to the tiny ball of light in his palms. Then Lukas whispered something directly to the soul, like he was whispering a secret of sorts. This was all the little soul needed apparently as it floated up.

Arthur watched with his own amazement. Never has he seen a soul by itself with no body to attach to just wander around so carelessly. The soul went up, down, left, right, and then with a sudden zip of energy flew out of the bathroom and out of sight.

"What did you tell it- er- Sven?" Arthur corrected himself.

Lukas wiped the tears from his eyes with two of his fingers. "I just told him that his parents missed him very much..."

If one would ask Alfred how he felt about separating from his youngest brother, at that moment, he wouldn't have cared. He had one goal in mind and that was to find Kiku and make sure he was alright. So, Alfred didn't even blink when Peter separated from him and got lost in the crowd. He'd find Peter later anyways.

Alfred heard what his father said earlier, that Kiku would most likely be in police custody. He hoped he wasn't too late and that Kiku hadn't been taken away just yet. He might not be able to stop Kiku from being taken, but he at least wanted to be there. To help him.

"-Sorry-" Alfred mumbled an apology as he bumped into someone. He then stopped walking and craned his neck to get a good look around in hopes of spotting Kiku. Alfred was honestly happy for his height as it gave him a bit of an advantage over everyone else.

The first thing that caught his eye was familiar champagne blonde hair. '*Great. Mattie made it on land after all.*' He noticed as he watched his brother take big strides towards Peter. Alfred

didn't focus on his twin for too long and even ignored that little voice in the back of his mind telling him '*Something's wrong.*' because he saw inky black hair just a little ways away.

'*There!*' Alfred's heart did a little flip when he saw Kiku; Kiku wasn't alone however as he was being led along in cuffs by a coast guard. Alfred felt his chest swell before he rushed in that direction without a care in the world. "Kiku!" He yelled out, catching Kiku's attention immediately.

"A-Alfred-san!" Kiku stammered in shock as Alfred charged up to him and the coast guard.

The coast guard, not Abel, grunted at Alfred immediately. "Can I help you, sir?" He was blunt and to the point. Alfred stopped running once he was only a few feet away and he paused.

'*I didn't think this far ahead.*' He realized after just a second of silence. Alfred quickly composed himself and cleared his throat, but he didn't need to speak because Kiku covered for him.

"Alfred-san is my roommate."

The coast guard grunted again. "I see."

The conversation was dropped and the man started walking Kiku towards the car. "W-wait-" Alfred sidestepped and got in front of them, hoping maybe to stall... '*but for what?*' he thought a little confused by his own actions. "What did he do? Like, I know Kiku and he's not... a wild child." Alfred tried to fight. He saw the coastal guard roll his eyes in response before stopping.

"He's being detained for the time being. This is official business so I can't tell you everything, just know he's needed for questioning." The man snorted at Alfred bluntly. "Now, please get out of my way."

Alfred opened his mouth to protest, but before anything came out there was an earth shattering scream that caused him, the guard, and Kiku to all turn towards that direction in startled alarm, but then only a second later did Alfred realize it wasn't a scream. It was a whistle. By the time Alfred looked in the direction of the whistle there was a bright flash of red and then the sound of actual screaming.

'*No!*' Alfred felt his fists clench as well as his teeth. He wished it were just his imagination, but he knew he wasn't imagining Ludwig flying up high in the air moments later, there was a blood curdling scream that left Ludwig's mouth only for him to be snatched in the air by red magic.

The coastal guard holding Kiku went into action, rushing towards the growing crowd of officers and military alike. Kiku now long forgotten from this man's mind. Alfred tired towards Kiku, but Kiku shook his head. "Go! Go stop them, don't worry about me.... Trust me, I can get out of these cuffs."

Alfred didn't know if he believed that, but he nodded nonetheless. If Marius was here then that means that he was probably still after Peter. "This bastard just doesn't know when to quit!" Alfred snarled out loud before charging for the area in question.

A cop tried to stop him by snatching him by his sleeve, but Alfred yanked his sleeve back before the man could get a good enough grip. Alfred pushed past several people, some officers barking at him to get back. Someone else tried to grab him only for Alfred to jump back and just book it for the front.

Then he heard Marius's voice.

"Shoot me, I *dare* you."

Alfred didn't need to think about what to do next. He pushed past several guards and boldly (albeit stupidly) made his way to where Marius was. All of Alfred's confidence and bravado withered away and abruptly *died* when he saw the type of leverage Marius had over everyone. "Matt-" Alfred wheezed out once he saw his twin. He took a step forward, but it was Gilbert that stopped him by placing his arm out in front of Alfred.

"Don't be reckless..." Gilbert hissed softly.

For a second Alfred wanted to argue. If Marius dropped Matt it'd be fine because Matt was clearly in his merman form... but then Alfred realized there was a *lot* more at stake here. It wasn't just Matt. Liam, Peter, Ludwig, and someone else Alfred didn't know. They were all being held in the air. A knife that Marius was threatening to drop at any second now. Matt, Liam, and Peter may survive water, but the two humans... no way.

"-Get off of me!" a familiar voice suddenly shouted; Alfred whipped his head around to see Tino being pinned on the ground. By Marius? No. Coastal guards? Nope. But by Feliks. Tino looked absolutely feral, ready to kill any second while Feliks kept a knee planted firmly in the middle of Tino's back and used his hands to keep Tino's arms pinned to the ground. Tino still had use of his legs and was kicking but he wasn't hitting anyone. Feliks knew what he was doing.

Alfred caught Berwald's eyes. Berwald was standing, shaking. His fists were balled so tightly that the veins in his arms popped out. He, unlike Tino, was showing some control. '*But for how long?*'

"Dammit." Alfred growled out and focused back around at Marius. "What do you *want* from us!? You *lost*, asshole! You couldn't secure the boat and lost an eye trying to do it! Just give up!"

Marius sneered at Alfred. "I want Arthur!"

Alfred felt the blood drain from his face. "Is that all? You might as well ask for all the money in the world while you're at it."

"Your attempt at sarcasm is pitiful at worst and annoying at best."

"I've been told that before."

"Alfred." Marius's commanding voice made Alfred suppress a shudder. Alfred then looked at Marius and just tilted his head up slightly, silently telling Marius to continue. Marius did so.

"I'm going to make this ransom very simple. Arthur took Petru! I want both Arthur *and* Petru. I know *someone* has to have seen Arthur. Either you tell me where he is or someone is getting hurt!" Marius's voice turned borderline manic as he screamed the end of his threat.

Ludwig, unlike the people he was strung up with, was very lively and instantly started to kick at the air in a panic motion. Alfred noticed that Ludwig wasn't kicking for no reason, Ludwig was trying to kick at Peter, who was the closest to him. This baffled Alfred but he decided not to stare for too long. If Marius saw he might sedate Ludwig like he had the others. Thankfully, Marius was too focused on the people before him to notice (or care) about what Ludwig was doing.

"Alfred." Marius suddenly snapped his fingers and he held out an outstretched hand. It was almost like he wanted Alfred to take it. Alfred would have taken it too if it weren't for the small ball of green light. The green light almost seemed to be leaking into Marius's hand and getting slightly bigger by the second. Alfred's eyes tore away from the glowing ball of green as he realized where it streaming from...

Alfred's eyes must have become comically wide at that point once he saw the green light was leaving Matthew's body, and as a result Matthew was slowly losing his tail and regaining his legs.

It was Arthur's magic. Marius had found a way to extract Arthur's own magic from their bodies. Of course he did...

"I could have done this to Peter in the start you know." Marius commented as he almost seemed to play with the ball of magic by moving his fingers around it. It moved with his fingers effortlessly. "But I didn't." Marius ignored the gasps and awes around him as the humans just watched in amazement, but Alfred had seen all of this before. Growing up around magic (and having magic inside of you) had its perks. Still, this didn't help Alfred's nerves and he was grateful for Gilbert speaking up at that moment.

"So what? You want a medal?! Get off your high horse. You. murder. Children! You're no better than the scum at the bottom of the ocean." Gilbert hissed between his teeth. Then there was a sudden silence, not from Marius or the crowd, but from Tino. He had ceased his manic screaming.

'One of those children... they were his.' Alfred remembered at that moment as he looked at Tino on the ground. They locked eyes and Alfred saw it.

Tino knew.

A thought formed but it was killed when Marius spoke. His voice was low, calculating, and deadly all the same. "Let's get something straight. I don't enjoy killing children." Marius's tone was low, calculating. "I did what I did to keep my own alive, but, understand this-"

Marius jerked one of his arms down and to everyone's horror Ludwig's bind vanished and he fell with a startled scream.

"No!" Gilbert cried in horror, but it was for nothing, as Marius was a sadistic fucker and he used his magic to grab Ludwig once more. This time however, Ludwig was grabbed by his ankle and forced upside down. Still, this kid had some *spunk* as he was now angrily yelling at Marius in German. Every curse word he knew, no doubt.

"-I won't hesitate to do what is needed! So I suggest you keep your damn mouth shut!"

It did the trick because Gilbert backed off with gritted teeth and clenched fists. Then came a tiny little war cry. Gilbert was quicker than Alfred when he reached over and snatched Feliciano by his arm before he could put his attack plan into action.

"What are you doing!?" Gilbert grunted as he tried to keep Feliciano from charging headfirst to his doom.

"I'm going to protect Ludwig-"

"-Not by being dumb you're not-"

While they spoke, someone else suddenly joined their group. "I'm going to go off on a limb here-" A heavy set dark skinned man suddenly spoke. He walked over, clipping Alfred's shoulder in the process, and he stood between Alfred and Marius. This made Alfred's eyebrows shoot up in question at the man's actions. The man was dressed as a cop, yes, but from what Alfred could see most cops were keeping their distance. "-You're talking about Arthur Kirkland?" The man inquired.

Marius shrugged. "I don't know what he chose to give himself as a last name."

"Hm. I'm just going to assume we're all talking about the same Arthur here. Arthur hasn't been seen for the last six years so why are you sure that he's here in town? It would be unwise for a *murderer* to come back. Wouldn't you agree, Marius?"

Marius was about to answer but paused for a moment before smirking to himself. A smug smirk that made Alfred want nothing more than to punch it right off of Marius's face.

'*Okay Alfred, think.*' The world almost seemed to pause as Alfred analyzed the scene before him. For the first time in his life he had to be strategic, something he was never good at. Alfred usually ran headfirst into his problems, but he couldn't do that. Not now. Not with so many people involved. Someone could die and he didn't want death. There's been too much of that already.

The first place he looked was to the hostages. '*With dad's magic stripped Matthew is now fully human. He won't survive the water. The waves would crush him against the wall. Same with the other two humans. Peter can transform and it doesn't seem that Marius had stripped Liam of his magic. Which is good.*' Alfred then turned to look back over at Tino, Feliks, and Berwald.

'Tino is in shock. He hasn't moved or said anything, but Feliks is still keeping on him. Berwald...' Alfred followed Berwald's gaze. Unsurprisingly he was staring at Peter. *'I saw Peter go for them. What happened?... They must have looked away...'* Alfred looked over his shoulder, the cops and coastal guards were not much help. Everyone just looked to be in shock. As they should be.

'Tino is a wildfire of a human. He took out Marius's eye with no hesitation. If I want a quick attack I could use him, no doubt the only thing on his mind right now is revenge. That'll make him deadly... as well as a liability. I don't want Marius dead, I just need everyone free from his clutches. Tino will kill him... no question.'

Alfred suddenly met eyes with the tallest officer that stood just a few feet away. This officer stared back at Alfred and seemed to just sense that Alfred was looking for help. Any help he could get really. The officer didn't speak once as he let his eyes do the talking at that moment. His purple eyes flickered from Alfred and then down. Alfred followed his gaze and saw that he had a hand on his pistol.

He wanted to shoot and more than that. This man was asking for *permission* to do so. *'Of course, Matthew's, Peter's, and Liam's lives all hang in the balance...'* Man, did Alfred wish for magic of his own. If he had magic of his own he'd probably use it to wake Liam up. Liam would know what to do...

Alfred bit his lip as he felt tears suddenly prick behind his eyes. *'Liam always knows what to do... dammit, why'd it have to be just me right now?'* Alfred felt on the verge of a panic attack. *'It doesn't have to be though... you still have magic don't you? If he drops them I could jump in and save them. I'd still have my tail. The impact might even wake Peter and Liam up. So extra help...but... we'd be putting Ludwig and the other human at risk. If they survive the fall... those waves... unless...'* Alfred looked at the rock down by his foot and then looked up at Ludwig.

Ludwig had stopped his cursing and was still trying to reach Peter....

Why?

Why was Ludwig so determined to get to Peter?

Unless... *'He's trying to wake Peter.'*

It sparked something in Alfred's brain. There was one thing he knew about Marius's magic and that was that it wasn't perfect. No magic was. The wheels in his head started to turn as he looked over at the cop in front of him, more specifically the baton.

Then it was like the world finally caught up with itself as Alfred realized his time was up. He *had* to make a choice. Right here and right now if he hesitated any longer... There's no telling what Marius would do.

Alfred did what he did best. He acted first and thought later. He scooped the rock into his hand, cocked his arm back, and tossed the rock. Marius blinked in surprise when a rock whizzed right by his face.

Marius then growled. "What was that supposed to be a threat?!" For about a whole second you could have heard a pin drop with how silent everyone suddenly became.

Alfred's rock hit it's target. Liam's nose. "Ow!" came the surprise yelp from Liam.

Marius spun in shock and that's when Alfred rushed to Máximo, snatching the baton out of his belt. "W-" Alfred charged before Máximo could stop him. He had only one goal in mind.

Marius.

With a war cry he charged at Marius, wide-eyed and slightly shocked at Alfred's brazen attack. Marius shot magic Alfred's way and... by some miracle, or misstep, Alfred just hardly managed to step to the side in order to avoid the attack. *'I will never be able to do that again.'* Alfred thought for just a second but he never stopped his charge. A guttural scream left Alfred's mouth as he struck Marius's side with the baton so hard that Alfred knew he bruised a rib at least.

Marius didn't go down. No, surprisingly he stayed standing but doubled over in pain. It was too perfect and Alfred uppercut Marius's face. Marius let out a startled cry of pain and Alfred knew he couldn't hesitate, hesitating meant that Marius could use his magic. Alfred had to even the battlefield.

Even if that meant fighting dirty.

He grabbed Marius's shoulders and with all his force headbutted Marius's face. Marius wasn't expecting that and let out a muffled cry of surprise as he clutched at his bleeding nose for dear life. Blood absolutely gushed from Marius's, obviously, broken nose and spilled between his fingers and on the ground.

Truth be told, Alfred had no clue how hard a face could be because he dropped the baton and fell to one knee in a bit of a daze.

"You..." Marius hissed a muffled curse before he removed his hand from his gushing nose and let out several gasping breaths. His eyes glowed. A dangerous shade of red. "-are an absolute imbecile!"

"Not the first time I've been called that. Probably not the last either." Alfred laughed a dry laugh as he stood up fully. "Besides, it says something about *you*. Doesn't it?" Alfred wasn't looking at Marius as he said this.

Marius looked confused for a second. "Huh?!"

"You got outsmarted by an imbecile-" It was absolutely perfect when Liam shot at Marius with a blast of his magic. It was clear that the attack hurt Marius worse than Alfred's. He let out a cry of pain and immediately tried to clutch at his injured back. Alfred could see part of the injury. Much like how Liam had gotten hit earlier that day, Marius's injury was the exact same. Hot, steaming, and Alfred could see a blister already starting to form.

Honestly, it was a lucky guess on Alfred's part that the rock would wake Liam up. He was happy he got lucky.

With Marius's attention off of his hostages for that moment the ones under his spell woke. Each of them letting out soft whines of confusion. The human male next to Matthew actually yawned and went to stretch his arms. Before realizing his predicament and letting out a blood curdling scream.

"Huh?" Peter's bleary eyes blinked in confusion as he looked out at everyone watching him. Once he realized he was floating he looked concerned; once he realized that he was dangling above the ocean threatening to fall any second he panicked. He started kicking wildly. Ludwig came to Peter's temporary rescue. They spoke. Alfred couldn't hear what was being said but could hear them talking in soft voices. Whatever Ludwig told Peter it put mind at ease and he stopped his panicking.

Matthew didn't paic. In fact he just looked embarrassed at the fact that he was now currently naked. '*Priorities, Mattie.*' Alfred could only think as he approached the railing.

"-Tino!-" Feliks's startled cry cut Alfred out of his thoughts and by the time he managed to turn his head to see the damage it was too late. The tiger was finally freed.

If Alfred had to guess, Tino went prone for a long enough period of time for Feliks to release his arms. Tino had turned pushing Feliks off of him with one of his hands. Tino was basically an unstoppable force of pent up anger and rage. He charged, he snatched the forgotten baton on the ground and went for the kill.

Alfred was too slow to stop Tino when he brought the baton down hard across Marius's neck and shoulders. He could only watch in horror as Tino hooked one of his legs behind Marius's knees and with a rather expert move he pushed Marius down making him fall on his back. Tino straddled Marius's hips, raised the baton over his head, and let out a battle cry. Tino was out for blood, nothing more and nothing less.

It was Berwald that came flying and tackled Tino before he could do anymore damage. The two of them rolled on the ground before coming to a halt. There was a violent struggle between the both of them. Tino let out a scream as he tried to go for the baton that had fallen.

Berwald outweighed Tino in both height and weight, but Tino was putting up one hell of a fight. Tino kicked, screamed, and tried to bite his way out Berwald's arms in a feeble attempt to grab the baton. Berwald clearly loved Tino because didn't fight back, in fact, he was trying to hug Tino in submission. "-I'm sorry." Berwald just whispered to Tino over and over again. Then came Andersen, when Andersen suddenly hugged Tino with Berwald, sandwiching the small blonde in a hug it was then did Tino finally stop his struggling.

Tino let out a cough, then a gag, before letting out a heart wrenching scream that turned into an equally heart wrenching sob. All of this happened in just a matter of seconds. The three men were on the ground in an awkward threeway hug with one another.

It was Marius's weak raspy breaths that caught Alfred's attention next. Marius was crouched down on his knees. Hands clamped tightly over the back of his neck where Tino had struck.

His hands glowing red but the magic was flickering like he couldn't produce enough. *'He's healing himself!'* Alfred could only watch as Marius dropped his hostages like flies.

For Alfred it was like his limbs were made of lead. That he just couldn't move fast enough as he raced towards his siblings. He wasn't alone. He knew Gilbert was going for his brother and he let Gilbert do just that.

"Gotcha!" Gilbert yelled and Ludwig let out a scream, but Alfred didn't look. He didn't let it distract him from Matthew. Matthew was Alfred's main priority. Without Arthur's magic Matthew would no doubt drown, Peter and Liam would be fine. The other human, Alfred hoped Peter or Liam would save him.

Alfred jumped up on the railing and reached out.

It was at that moment he managed to grab Matthew's arm, and it was also at that moment did the railing, that wasn't meant for heavy weight, give out under Alfred. By some sheer miracle Alfred managed to hook his arm to the same railing. The railing didn't fall but just bent. It was still in place but not for long. To Alfred's horror he could see the rail strain under the weight already it looked ready to snap any minute. His arm burned like it was on fire, no doubt straining from holding himself and Matthew up.

Peter was screaming... and screaming... and screaming.

'How long has he been falling?' Alfred thought as seconds ticked by. When he looked down he found out that Peter was, in fact, *not* falling. A sickening sense of Deja vu hit Alfred like a motherfucking truck. Alfred had Matthew by his arm, in turn, Matthew had Peter by the back of his shirt. Liam and the other human fell into the water.

There was a sickening creak coming from the rail as it threatened to give out any second.

"Hang on!" Alfred screamed out in worry.

"No, I thought I'd let go!" Matthew screamed back, the sarcasm clear as day in his voice.

"Don't let go! Are you crazy!?" Peter's crazed shriek cut through the air almost immediately afterwards.

"Well... isn't this familiar?"

The more Alfred heard Marius's voice the more Alfred hated him. Marius planted a foot up on the railing. The railing let out a low moan at the added weight. It shook and tried it's hardest to hold on, but something told Alfred that this railing was going to give any second now. It really didn't help when Marius put his arms over his knee adding more weight to the railing. "Daddy isn't here to save you now, is he?"

It was like Marius was proving a point by suddenly extracting Arthur's magic from Alfred. Alfred hissed and he tried to will the magic back into his body, but magic didn't work that way. This wasn't Alfred's magic, therefore he had no say in it. "What?" Peter couldn't mask

the shock in his voice as he watched in horror from below. When Alfred looked down he saw that Marius was doing the same to Peter.

Marius *wanted* them dead. This wasn't just a spat, it stopped being that a long time ago, this was... this was pure unadulterated *hatred*.

Once Marius got what he wanted he promptly stood and looked down at them. He closed his fist around the magic and Alfred watched as Arthur's magic dispersed as a result, Marius didn't even save it for himself. Not that he could use it.

"...You killed Francis Bonnefoy!" It was Gilbert and for a moment Alfred thought that truly Gilbert had gone crazy. That was until Marius looked away from Alfred and his brothers to address Gilbert. '*He's distracting Marius... and it's working.*'

Alfred looked down at his brothers, who were both looking up at him scared out of their minds.

"What?" Marius demanded impatiently.

"You fucking heard me. You killed Francis Bonnefoy six years ago! Not Arthur Kirkland!"

Alfred tried to use his arm that was hooked around the railing to pull him and his brothers up during this moment. Alfred's arm strained and he felt his muscles tear. The railing let out a loud creak as a result and this time it actually jerked down causing all of them to drop several inches. Peter screamed out in fear.

Obviously Marius heard the commotion and when he did he didn't even hesitate with his next move. "You're right. I did. And I don't plan on stopping! I won't stop until everyone in Arthur's life is dead!" It was with that declaration did Marius turn and with one powerful kick he broke the railing.

Alfred felt his life flash before his eyes as he and his brothers fell. Kiku's face flashed into Alfred's mind suddenly. Seeing Kiku standing in his garden, the biggest smile on his face as he picked ripe fruits and veggies while Alfred held the basket. '*I'll never get to tell him how I feel.*' For Alfred it just felt silly to think about Kiku at a time like *this*. As he was literally falling to his demise all he could see was Kiku and how *happy* and at home Kiku made him feel in the last two weeks.

Then...suddenly...Alfred *wasn't* falling, but he didn't hit the water either. Something wrapped around his middle like a rope and held him, and his brothers, firmly. Alfred could hear the rapid waves and when he craned his neck to look down he realized they were only a few feet from the water. "I'm dead. I died. I'm dead!" Peter whispered horrifically to himself as he had his hands over his eyes. Matthew wasn't looking at the water with Alfred no, he was looking up.

"Alfie?..." Matthew whispered in a shocked tone.

"Yeah?" Alfred found himself whispering back, no idea why they were whispering in the first place. He was just glad that neither he, nor his brothers, were currently trying to fight the

rapid waves.

"Who...has *blue* magic?"

"Blue-" before Alfred could finish his question all three of them were suddenly shot upwards like they were on a ride of sorts. Honestly, Alfred's biggest fear was the sudden whiplash he received. Up they went until they were back where they started and before Alfred could even think they were pulled in just as violently.

All three of them tumbled as the magic released them and they rolled on the ground until each and everyone of them came to a stop. Alfred felt sick, not mentally, like physically, all the movements he received in the last thirty seconds twisted and turned his stomach. Both Matthew and Peter let out equal groans of nausea telling Alfred they felt the same way.

Alfred wanted to stand but his body demanded he stayed laying down if he wanted to keep his lunch. So, Alfred settled on just looking up to see what had happened.

Blue magic.

Only one person came to Alfred's mind.

"Are you alright?" Lukas questioned softly as he dropped a bag of clothes directly on Matthew. He asked Peter if he was alright before turning to Matthew. "Cover yourself, please." Lukas himself was still dressed in a tank top and boxers only now he had on sandals to protect his feet from the ground.

"I thought you weren't getting involved- " Marius growled but he didn't get a chance to say anything else because Lukas. Wasn't. Having. It.

With a sudden blast of blue magic he sent Marius flying back into the railing. Marius groaned and his head just hung limply. He was starting to run out of fumes. "Stand up." Lukas suddenly demanded as both of his hands suddenly started to glow brightly. He wasn't playing around and Alfred only watched with both horror and admiration as Lukas approached Marius.

"Where is Petru?" Marius mumbled out weakly as he kept his head hanging low.

"Fight me." A weak laugh left Marius's mouth. This only angered Lukas as his nose scrunched like he was smelling something bad.

"I don't understand, Lukas, I thought you were staying out of it."

"You brought me into it when you broke into my home and kidnapped Emil. Now stand up and *fight me!*"

Another weak laugh left Marius's mouth as he used a sturdy railing to help pull himself to his feet. He kept his head low and his knees almost collapsed on him. Then Marius pulled his long hair out of his eye. His blind one. "Do you l-like what your little friend did to me, Lukas?" Marius asked. Marius was starting to sound drunk as his speech slurred weakly and

he stumbled on his feet. Marius pointed past Lukas and directly at Tino who was still in Berwald's arms.

Lukas looked over at Tino before back at Marius. "You killed his son, Marius."

"Always defending humans..."

"Fight me. Marius-" Marius complied with Lukas's wish and shot at him with a blast of magic. Lukas only just managed to block the attack with a shield. It didn't knock him back but it did cause him to stumble in surprise.

Feeling movement beside him, Alfred looked over to see Matthew quickly getting himself decent. Alfred finally looked over at the people to see just why *nobody* came to help. The shock was one thing, but by now the shock should have worn off.

It was faint and if Alfred wasn't looking for it he wouldn't have noticed it at all. Lukas, ever the human-lover, was using a shield or barrier of sorts keeping them out and away from the fighting. It wasn't for lack of trying though, as several guards and officers alike were doing what they could to try and beat at the barrier in hopes of it going down.

"Alfred-" Matthew caught Alfred's attention. Dressed properly now, Matthew extended a hand to Alfred. It took a few seconds for Alfred's mind to fully register what Matthew wanted him to do, but eventually, he did grab Matthew's hand and he too was up on his feet.

Alfred's right arm was immediately in pain, so much that it nearly caused him to fall to his knees. "I...I think I tore something..." He hissed between clenched teeth as he grabbed at his arm.

"It wouldn't surprise me. Holding us up like that... It was like..."

"I know," Alfred grunted.

A flash of light caught his and Matthew's attention and they could only watch as Lukas and Marius fought it out. Honestly, they were both just shooting magic back and forth, there was no thought or strategy involved...

Or was there?

'Why does Lukas want to fight Marius so badly? It just doesn't make sense, earlier he seemed more keen on keeping everyone safe and didn't seem to want to be anymore involved. Yet now... It's like...' Alfred's mind was reeling but he was starting to grow tired and his mind was slowing down to a sluggish pace as a result. It really didn't help that he was in pain either.

Maybe if Alfred was paying more attention he might have noticed one key detail: The barrier behind them wasn't a pale shade of blue, but rather a pale shade of green.

Chapter End Notes

So, I won't lie to you guys. Some of you know I've recently been forced to watch all of Attack on Titan by my 13-year-old niece aaaaand I loved it. (Except for season 4 tbh) So a couple of scenes were actually inspired because of Attack on Titan! The scene with Berwald and Tino struggling on the ground was one of the bigger ones. I also have been listening to both the first theme song and Sasageyo on repeat nonstop. (They've been great for the more fast-paced scenes.) I will have to say though, Attack on Titan is also a reason why updating has been a bit slow as I now want to write a story for that fandom as well, but don't worry. I don't plan on stopping this story until it's complete.

The final hours part three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Blue met red only to be slapped down with little effort and before Lukas knew it he was tossed back into the barrier. With a grunt, he fell to his side. With the concrete lightly scratching and skinning his bare legs he regretted his outfit choice. Lukas tasted blood and realized that his lip busted open. With a growl of annoyance, he stood, wiping the blood off of his lip with his thumb. "This is just sad." Marius grinned as he swayed slightly from side to side.

In a way, it was. Lukas really thought that with how much magic Marius had been using up he would have passed out from sheer exhaustion by now. *'He's hanging on for as long as he can, but... what happens if he uses too much magic?'* It was a terrifying thought that crossed Lukas's mind. Magic uses energy, this was a common fact. If Marius was pushing past his limits and he was going past the point of exhaustion then... What will the magic take to keep going?

'He's killing himself.' Lukas realized as he braced himself against the barrier. *'I have to knock him out-'* Lukas gasped softly and jumped out of the way as a red ball of light came straight for him. *'Not only that but-'* Lukas took a quick look at all the people watching this train wreck go down. *'Arthur can't keep the barrier up forever either. If I don't knock him out in time **and** get him away they'll kill him...maybe even me... I need a way out-.'*

Lukas's leg was suddenly grabbed and before he knew it he was yanked forcefully down to his back. One of his sandals went flying from the sudden movement. The next thing he knew *he* went flying. He didn't fly far, but by god, Lukas *flew* for half a second. Lukas's lower back hit the ground first and foremost. It was just below his spine at his tailbone and it *hurt*.

It was almost *agonizing*.

Lukas rolled to a stop and gritted his teeth. He didn't stop himself from instinctively reaching around to apply pressure to his tailbone to quickly heal it. However, his arm was harshly grabbed and yanked back by Marius. "I don't think so!" Then before Lukas knew it Marius planted his foot *directly* on Lukas's tailbone.

Yeah, Lukas couldn't stop his cry of pain that time. He tried to suppress it so it really came out as a high pitch yelp. "Lukas, I've been *watching* you. You haven't practiced your magic in years and you think you can challenge me? I may not be at full strength but I'm still stronger than you-" Marius dug his heel into Lukas's tailbone and yanked Lukas's arm back even farther.

"You sadistic- *fucker!*" Lukas's voice turned shrill when Marius suddenly dug his foot too firmly into Lukas's injured tailbone. Lukas looked over his shoulder at the brothers.

Something just told him to look. One of the twins, Matthew had something in his hands, it looked like string... shoestring to be exact.

They made eye contact. Matthew said nothing, but he tightened the shoestring around both of his hands and made a taut line. Lukas knew exactly what he had to do. With a war cry and grabbed at Marius's leg with both of his arms. "Oh, this is just sad." Marius cooed. "What do you plan to do by clinging to my leg like a child?"

"Distract you."

It was no sooner than Lukas had said it did the attack happen. It was Matthew that wrapped the shoestring around Marius's neck and pulled as tight as he could. This caused Marius to react more out of instinct than reflex. Marius reached and tried to pull the shoestring away from his neck all while letting out a horrid gagging noise as he choked.

Lukas took this moment to heal himself. He didn't bother healing fully, just enough so he could stand up again. Lukas jumped to his feet, he kicked off the other sandal at this point and for just a second he thought about what he needed to do. Matthew was strong (ish) but it wasn't enough. Even now as the two of them struggled, Matthew was trying his hardest to get Marius to go down.

Marius was running on instinct at this point and it was clear that magic *was* his instinct. As once it clicked what was happening to him, Marius turned, placed his hand directly on Matthew's face, and shot him back with no mercy.

Matthew flew for a moment before landing on his side. Alfred was at his twin's side in a heartbeat. Alfred cradled Matthew's head in his lap, and even though Lukas couldn't see the extent of Matthew's injury he knew it had to be horrible by Alfred's shocked cry. It was also pretty obvious that Matthew didn't communicate his plan to his brother when Alfred yelled: "Are you crazy!?" To Matthew. Matthew was still conscious and even sat up, his head spinning just slightly.

Then came Peter. The tiny little ball of fury charged and the next thing Lukas knew Marius went down screaming, absolutely screaming shrilly, clutching at his bleeding leg. Peter had *stabbed* Marius right in the upper thigh. A blue handle sticking out, Lukas couldn't see the blade meaning Peter dug it in as *deep* as he could get it. Lukas saw the blood drip from between Marius's fingers and felt his stomach flip uncomfortably. One would think this would be the point where Marius gives up. After all, in the last thirty seconds, he's been both choked by a shoestring and stabbed in the thigh. No, this was just more kindle to the wildfire.

Marius swung his arm out, aiming directly for Peter. Both twins scrambled to their youngest brother. Peter didn't back down, he just stood there defiantly with his fists clenched to his sides. Ready for whatever Marius threw at him.

"Peter!" Both had yelled as they raced to Peter. Each twin took a side. They sandwiched Peter in between their bodies in a feeble attempt to protect him.

For just a second Lukas saw it, he saw them as Arthur had all those years back. Scared children thrust into turmoil and trauma.

Marius's attack never hit as Lukas wrapped his own magic around Marius's hand like a rope and pulled Marius back with all of his might. Marius, at first, looked shocked before it was quickly replaced with a mix of rage and mild annoyance.

Marius raised his other hand, and just like before Lukas used his magic and bound it down. Marius fought, but Lukas held his ground. With all of his strength, Lukas pulled Marius closely to the ground. "Let go of me!" Marius demanded and he tried to pull back. Lukas felt his body move with Marius's movement's and he tried his damndest to get his feet planted.

Lukas felt himself become frustrated by everything and yelled back: "Just pass out already!"

"You wish, you damned traitor! I will fight to the death if I have to!" Marius violently tugged back on Lukas's magic forcing Lukas to take several steps forward, he tripped over his own feet in an attempt to stop himself from falling. Lukas pulled back just as hard, making Marius move forward a step in response. It was a twisted game of Tug o' war between both parties. Lukas saw thick red blood slide down Marius's clothed leg and pool by his foot. Lukas's stomach twisted and turned at the gore before him.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Marius-" Lukas was so focused on Marius's leg that he failed to heal the loud '*pop!*' signaling teleportation. It was Liam, dressed in clothes just a little too tight, a flash of dark green came from his hands and he grabbed Marius right where Lukas had him and kept Marius still. "-but that's not an option!"

It wasn't just Liam as Lillie suddenly rushed past her older brother and rushed what little magic she was able to produce. A honey-colored rope of magic wraps it around Marius's legs, not to push him down, but rather to keep him in place. They wanted his movement limited.

Why?

Because this was their plan to start with, minus Liam's involvement. No doubt Arthur got Liam up to speed with the plan.

"Now, dad!" Liam practically screamed for his father. There was another '*pop!*' from above and thankfully Arthur seemed to know just where to land as he managed to be just above Marius. Arthur wrapped his legs around Marius's shoulders in a weird piggyback ride. Arthur used one hand to force Marius's face to look up at him and he held Marius by his chin. Arthur squeezed his hand around Marius's jaw and cheekbone forcing Marius's mouth to open.

That's when shit hit the fan, but finally, it happened in their favor. The world almost seemed to dim down as Arthur started extracting Marius's magic directly from Marius's mouth. His mouth was open in a silent scream as he watched in horror as his magic was forcibly removed from his body.

It was an insane sight to behold. Arthur's magic crept down into Marius's mouth and webbed out pulling Marius's magic out by strands and it pooled into his hand.

'It's not going to hurt him... is it?' Lukas didn't know why he asked this. Why he was suddenly caring about how Marius was going to feel.

'Physically? No. It doesn't hurt. Emotionally? Well... It'll probably shatter him for a bit.'
Arthur mumbled as he scratched at the side of his face. 'It won't be pretty...'

It honestly surprised Lukas to see that the color of the magic, once all put into Arthur's hand, changed colors. It went from a beautiful shade of crimson red to a pure bright white light that seemed to outshine the sun in that moment. It was huge, bigger than Lukas anticipated. After all, Petru's magic was so small. Then again, Petru is a child.

The silence that followed in the next few seconds was deafening as Marius caught his breath. Lukas expected Marius to start screaming. But the scream never came. Once his magic was forced out of his body, Marius's energy was officially sapped. His eyes closed shut, his body relaxed, and with a simple sigh, Marius fell.

Arthur managed to get down before Marius fell and with a simple wave of his arm he sent Marius's magic away. Where he stored these things Lukas will never know.

Then... once again... there was silence.

Lukas felt the tension grow as he looked at Liam and Lillie, neither of them letting go, none of them wanting to let go of Marius's limp body. *'Is he really unconscious? Or is this a ploy?'* Lukas felt stupid for thinking this but it was a legitimate question in his mind. Time and time again Marius tricked them and attacked when their guard was down. *'But... he can't attack without magic.'* Well, he could technically, but...

Lukas relaxed and let go of Marius's arms.

The moment he let go, Liam and Lillie both hesitantly followed suit. For several long seconds they all stood there, breathing uneasily, their arms raised up watching Marius's still form. The three brothers all stood by the side. Peter was still sandwiched between the twins arms, they no longer kept their bodies pressed against him like a shield.

The seconds ticked by, and after what had been thirty or so seconds it finally sunk in.

Marius was unconscious.

They won.

Arthur was in the middle of contemplating on how he was going to get everyone out of here. The cops and coastal guards weren't just going to let them go. *'No doubt it'll be a riot once the barrier goes down.'* Arthur sighed out loud as he thought this.

"That was *awesome!*"

Next thing Arthur knew he was encased in a giant bear hug and lifted off of the ground by Alfred. "Alfred-" Arthur actually laughed as he was twirled around in a wide circle. "Okay, okay, put me down-" he tapped Alfred on the shoulder lightly and Alfred complied obediently, but not before wincing and rubbing under his arm.

"I mean- I-I just- Wow! That was insane!" Alfred was grinning as he paced back and forth making big exaggerated movements wincing on the occasion. "And you two-" He ran to Liam and Lillie and hugged them both tightly. This made Liam blush lightly. "I was so worried..."

"Who are you and what did you do to Al?" Liam gave an awkward laugh as he patted Alfred's back.

"He's not Alfred, I am!" Matthew joined in with mock indignation and for a moment Liam actually looked worried that he had mixed the twins up.

"Don't listen to him, big brother- That's most definitely Matthew." Lillie puffed her cheeks out at Matthew. "And just what were *you* thinking?" In her anger, Lillie stormed up and grabbed Matthew by his ear. Matthew tensed when she pulled him down so they were eye level. "Look at your face!"

"I-uh-I can't?"

Lillie wasn't impressed and she pursed her lips tightly.

"Hey, Liam. Nice clothes, I think I own that same shirt." Matthew said with a laugh once Lillie was done with her scolding. Liam busted out laughing. In its chaos, Lukas had given them the wrong bag of clothes, hence why Matthew had a shoestring to start with.

'*She's not wrong.*' Arthur thought. Matthew took the brunt of Marius's attack. He was blasted back at point-blank. Matthew's lucky he only suffered a burnt cheek. No doubt if Marius was at full strength when he attacked, Matthew would be a lot less fortunate.

Arthur suddenly felt tugging on his clothes before Peter suddenly wrapped his arms around Arthur's body from behind. Peter spoke, but it was muffled and hard to make out. "Peter-" Arthur sighed. "I can't hear you, lad."

Peter moved around so he was now clinging to Arthur's side and not his back. Peter still kept his face planted firmly against Arthur's ribcage. Peter then spoke again, and like last time it was muffled. "Peter..." Alfred put his hand on Peter's head and with a little force, he pushed Peter's face back from his body. Arthur quickly deduced why Peter was hiding his face as tears and snot ran down his face from the ugly crying he was currently doing.

"I said I'm *sorry*!" Peter finally wailed as he clung to Arthur for dear life. Arthur gasped, not because Peter was actually *apologizing* (which was rare in its own right.) or because Peter was crying so hard, but because when Peter hugged him; he had rammed his head directly into Arthur's ribcage. "I didn't mean for all of this to happen..."

A sigh escaped Arthur's lips and he got down on one knee so he and Peter were face to face. "Peter, when everything calms down you and I are going to have a long, long, *long* talk. As for right now-" Arthur lightly patted Peter's hair. "-I'm just relieved you're alright." Peter gave a sniffle before giving a soft nod.

"Arthur." Lukas jogged up to Arthur and Peter. "I healed Marius's leg..." Lukas rubbed the back of his head. "I couldn't leave a... a chisel embedded in his leg- also- why the *hell* did you stab Marius with a chisel of all things?!" Lukas turned to Peter in question only to quickly brush it off. "-Nevermind. I don't want to know your thought process." Lukas pinched the bridge of his nose and just shook his head. "Besides, we don't have the time. Arthur, you're starting to wear out, I can see it in your eyes." Lukas focused back around at Arthur.

"Peter, go with your siblings." Arthur urged Peter away.

He wasn't wrong. Arthur could feel his energy start to sap away faster and faster with all of the magic he just used up as of late. The only thing keeping him going was when a good chunk of his magic returned to him thanks to Marius's own doing. If Marius hadn't had sucked his magic out of the boys Arthur might not be standing right now.

"How are we getting out of here? They aren't just going to let us go."

"I know..." Arthur muttered as he thought about it for a moment. "The only sure-fire way out of here is to teleport out of here, but only *we* know that ability. Not the children. We'll be spent if we try to do them one by one, and if we do them all at once something bad might happen to one or more of them." Arthur whispered to Lukas in a soft voice.

"-If I may-" Arthur jumped when Liam squeezed between Lukas and himself. "I think I may have a solution."

"Oh?" Arthur was legitimately curious. Liam usually avoided the topic of magic altogether. Liam wrapped an arm around both of their shoulders and pulled them in like he was giving them a three-way hug. Arthur paused for a moment as he suddenly realized that Liam was not only taller than he was, but taller than Lukas as well. '*When exactly did he get so tall?*' Arthur pondered for a second or two.

"It's going to cause a bit of uproar on our side, but I think it's the best way to get everyone out of here safely..."

"Do you think they're talking about us?"

"Peter, they are most *definitely* talking about us." Matthew sighed as he watched Liam, Lillie Lukas, and their dad talk. This left the three of them feeling like the odd ones out as they stood off to the side and just watched.

He looked down at Marius who could easily pass as dead on the ground. Matthew watched Marius intensely and felt relieved when he saw Marius's chest rise and fall rhythmically. Matthew quickly tried to hide his relief and turned his head over his shoulder at the crowd being held back by the barrier used to keep them out. None looked happy. The coastal guards and police had their guns drawn. The coastal guards had formed a semi-circle around the barrier, guns are drawn, all tense, no doubt waiting for the moment the barrier went down...

Matthew scanned the crowd for Máximo but he couldn't see him anywhere. Nor could he see Gilbert or Ludwig.

Matthew knew it wasn't their fault, they were probably either forced away or just wanted to get away. Still, he just wished he could give them both a proper goodbye. Matthew wasn't dumb, no doubt their father would put an end to them living on the land after this was all over and behind them.

"Maaaatttieeee..." Alfred suddenly rested his whole upper body on Matthew's back. It seemed Alfred sensed what Matthew was sensing at that moment because of what he said next: "I don't want to leave." His whine was muffled as he pressed his face into Matthew's back. This was intentional, Alfred didn't want the others to hear, with good reason no doubt.

"We don't have much of a choice. Those guards look ready to either shoot us or detain us."

"We saved the day..."

"To be completely fair here. *We*-" Matthew gestured between the three of them. "-Did nothing but get thrown around like ragdolls for ten minutes."

Peter put both of his hands on his hips. "Hey, I stabbed Marius."

"Peter, the fact that you stabbed someone isn't a cause for celebration. If anything, it makes me concerned." Matthew put it bluntly.

Peter pouted, "See if I go risking my neck for you again, Matthew." He then stuck his tongue out.

"For the last time, it's Matt- oh..." Matthew blushed before huffing out angrily. "Whatever." He turned his head away and Alfred laughed a little at the whole interaction.

Liam suddenly came jogging over to them only seconds later. "Hey-" He put himself between Matthew and Alfred, putting the two of them in a hug. "-How are you two feeling?" He asked in a soft voice as he started to walk them away.

"Been better..." Matthew admitted and he resisted the urge to touch his burnt cheek. "I wanted to ask, did you get Eduard out of the water?" Matthew steered the conversation as he continued to walk with Liam and Alfred.

"Eduard...Oh, the guy with the glasses? Yeah, I got him out of the water before I came to help you guys out. He seemed shaken but fine." Liam shrugged.

"How exactly did you get here? That barrier should have stopped you." Alfred pointed out. While Alfred asked, Matthew felt... weird. He couldn't quite place why he felt weird. He just did.

"Oh, that... Dad teleported me here." Liam gave another sigh and he moved his hands so they were draped over both of their shoulders. They walked up to the edge where the one railing used to be. Alfred hissed suddenly and rubbed under his right arm from recent memory. This didn't go unnoticed by Liam. "You good?"

"Yeah, I just think I tore something."

"Right, both of you need healing," Liam muttered and let them both go. Now he was standing in front of them as they stood with their back to the broken railing. "But right now we need to talk."

Alfred and Matthew looked at each other then back at Liam. "'Bout what?" Matthew asked and tilted his head just lightly to the side.

"Dad can't keep this barrier up forever and those people don't exactly look friendly." Liam thrust his thumb towards the coastal guards in question. "So, we've come up with a plan. With what little magic he has left Lukas and dad are going to take Marius away." Liam informed them.

"Okay, great." Alfred shrugged. "Let's get out of here."

Liam had a smirk on his face. He looked like he had been waiting for this moment his whole life as his eyes filled with malicious glee. "Yeah, about that-" Liam reached forward and grabbed both of them by their shirts. Matthew gasped once he realized that Liam had them dangled just over the edge. "-Dad said this was preferable for the rest of us." And Liam released his hold on them.

Matthew gasped. There was nothing to stop his fall from the edge as the railing broke and down he went. Both he and Alfred fell for several agonizing seconds before they hit the water. An extreme sense of vertigo hit Matthew once in the water, he didn't know which way was up and just swam trying to reach the surface. The waves were very brutal in this part of the ocean and he feared he'd be crushed against the wall.

Then, as he struggled in the water, he felt it. The pull just below his navel. '*Liam you-*' Matthew didn't get to finish his thought as his legs fused together and before he knew it he was able to breathe under the water. His vision became just a little clearer, and then his tail came back with a flash of dark green.

Matthew oddly felt at peace in the water as he floated down to the bottom. The sand was soft under his body and it was there that Matthew just started to laugh while looking up towards the water's surface. Soft little laughs. Meanwhile; judging by the string of curses that were leaving Alfred's mouth, Alfred was having the opposite reaction. "I'm going to *kill* him! That- That just wasn't cool! I can't believe dad put him up to this!"

Alfred was up and swimming from side to side while he thought about how he was going to get away with murder.

"You clearly missed the gleam in his eyes. I'm willing to bet it was Liam's idea." Matthew smiled. "I also want to bet that he's been *waiting* to get us back for all the trouble and headache we caused him growing up."

Alfred just pouted and crossed his arms like a child. "Unbelievable..."

There was a splash not too far from them and both of them whipped their heads around to see Peter. Peter, like them, struggled violently against the waves for a moment before the magic kicked in and he, like them, regained his tail.

Once all was well, Peter looked at them with a bit of confusion before his face turned angry. He then bolted for the surface. Both Alfred and Matthew followed him. "-You rotten brother!" Peter screamed out above the waves. Matthew was *sure* he could see both Liam and Lillie laughing.

"Look out below!" Liam then yelled out before he and Lillie both jumped down at the same time. Lillie dived while Liam went for a cannonball. The water splashed when both of them hit.

Lillie came up first, unlike the rest of them, she flashed brown, mimicking her own magic. When she came up, she kept half her face hidden in the water. Liam came up next, and like Lillie, he kept himself only half-hidden. "You-" Alfred turned to Liam, but it seemed Liam planned this, as the moment Alfred faced him, Liam fired. He spat a stream of water directly at Alfred's face. Suddenly, Matthew was hit by a stream of water by Lillie.

Alfred's anger melted away after a couple of seconds and he just splashed at Liam with a joyful laugh before going under. Lillie and Peter both went after them, but Matthew stayed behind. He knew he couldn't stay behind for long, but just long enough to see a flash of blue just before the barrier went down. *'I'll come back one day... when everything calms down. I promise.'*

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter... I can't believe it. I only have one more chapter to go... What's funny is that when I first wrote this story I thought this was going to be a quick 10-15 chapter story. Man, was I wrong! Let me tell you, this story was a rollercoaster for me to write and I loved every minute of it!

Fin

Chapter Notes

So... what took this chapter so long? Well, first I made a new fic. I tried to hold off until this store was finished but I just couldn't. So, this chapter just took a back burner... and then I got into Stardew Valley. Stardew Valley has been my life for the past month three or so weeks and so this chapter took a back back burner. I hope you can forgive me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Marius really didn't expect to wake up. When Arthur landed on him and stripped him of his magic, Marius figured that was it: he was done for. So, when he opened his eyes that alone was a surprise. So much so that it took him a good minute to realize he could see out of *both* eyes, not just the one. This took him even longer to realize he was looking up at a ceiling. He didn't know this place and felt his brow furrow.

Marius blinked and that was when a familiar face suddenly popped into his view. "Arthur..." Marius mustered out a weak groan. His mouth and throat were so dry that it hurt to swallow and when he spoke it felt like his vocal cords were rubbing against sandpaper. Marius tried to move his arms, but he found that they were quite stuck. When he looked away from Arthur he saw that his arms and legs were bound together with green magic.

Arthur had a scowl on his face as he suddenly sat down. Marius followed Arthur and saw him sit on a coffee table. Arthur lightly tapped his fingers against his legs as he stared Marius down. Seconds passed and Marius coughed lightly. "I know... I know I'm not in the position to ask for anything right now, but could I bother you for some water?" Marius asked in a hoarse voice. Arthur stopped his tapping, thought about it, then got up.

"I guess that's not unreasonable." Arthur said as he moved to the kitchen that was just behind Marius.

"... So... who's house is this? I'm assuming it's not yours."

"It's not, and I'm not telling you who it belongs to." Arthur was stern with his wording. Arthur was soon in front of him with a bottle of water in hand. Marius thought for just a second that Arthur was just going to dump the water right on his face. He would have every right too, but no. Arthur didn't.

"Lift your head a bit." Arthur instructed as he got down on one knee. Marius did as instructed, it was a little awkward having Arthur give him a drink like this, but it was better than wearing the drink. The water was lukewarm and a little did dribble down his chin and set the collar of his shirt a bit. Once he got his fill of water, Arthur put the bottle on the coffee table and sat back down.

"...Thanks..."

"..." Arthur didn't respond right away as he just stared at Marius.

"How long was I out for?"

"A day and a half."

Marius blinked in shock and for just a second he waited for Arthur to say 'Just kidding!' but it never came. *'If I've truly been asleep for that long then- Petru!'* Marius felt tears build in the corners of his eyes. This. This was why he was bound. Arthur and Lukas both knew his reaction would be violent. Marius tried to struggle against his bounds, but it did little, he even tried to use his magic, but was reminded of the harsh fact that his magic was no longer with him. Arthur just crossed one leg over the other and sighed.

"Marius... calm down. Please." It was a simple command, and that command made Marius realize he wasn't 'struggling a little' but was rather trying to bite at the binds around his arms. The moment he realized what he had been doing. He stopped.

For once, he actually listened to Arthur. Was it magic? Arthur controlling him?

No, Marius didn't think it went that deep. He gritted his teeth together in an angry gnash. "How can you ask me to calm down?!" Marius demanded. "I lost everything..." All his anger just seemed to diminish into pitiful crying as tears fell down his cheeks. "Petru was all I had!"

Arthur leaned back a bit. "I know... I would have him here, but I wanted to be sure you weren't going to attack."

It took Marius a full moment to process what he heard. He blinked the tears away, but they wouldn't stop coming. Yet... he wasn't sad... he felt overjoyed at the news in fact. "He's alive?" Marius wheezed out in shock; It was a stupid question to ask he knew this.

Arthur actually scoffed at the question. "Of course he's alive. Granted it was dicey with how many souls were crampacked into little Petru, but with the help of Lukas we managed to get them all out and-" It was like someone above was listening because suddenly there was a small squeal, not of pain, but of excitement. Before Marius could blink Arthur's binds were removed and then next thing he knew he was suddenly attacked by a tiny little body that had come from the next room over.

"Marius!" Petru happily cried as he hugged Marius and buried his face into Marius's hair.

"Petru?"

Marius almost couldn't believe it. Petru was so lively as he happily bounced on Marius's knees. He maneuvered around so he was sitting up. Marius kept a tight hold on Petru before he pulled him back just enough to look at his boy's face. *'This can't be real.'* Marius could only think as his brain felt stunned.

Petru had been babbling on. Talking about how Lukas and Arthur had to teach him how to walk, and how Emil had laughed when Petru fell down and got scolded by Lukas and-

'A fake maybe?'

Marius reached one hand up and simply placed the palm of his hand against Petru's hair on the top of his head. It was soft to the touch, and the motion made Petru quiet down. "Big brother?" Petru asked and he grabbed on to Marius's palm. "Are you alright?"

Once the realization set in, that Petru was *not* an illusion. He was absolutely real and...

Marius choked up at it. "Petru!" Marius wrapped his arms tightly around Petru's little body and felt the tears come on again. Soft sobs racked at Marius's frame. He knew he was hugging Petru tighter than he should as Petru squirmed against Marius's grip for a moment. "You're smothering me!" Petru finally protested with a whine and he could only back off.

"How do you feel? Are you sick?" Marius suddenly looked at Petru. Petru shook his head.

"I feel better than I had in years! Look!" Petru jumped from Marius's lap and to the floor. It was then did Marius suddenly realize that Petru was wearing an oversized long-sleeved shirt that reached his knees. Nothing else. No shoes, socks, or pants. Just the large oversized shirt. Still, to prove that he was feeling well, Petru flexed his arms. Even though the sleeves were way too long and dangled limply past his arms. "I feel like I could swim a whole mile!"

"Wow, a whole mile." Marius got down on one knee so he and Petru were face to face. "That's a lot of swimming, little brother, I'm not sure if you could keep up with someone like me."

Petru looked aghast and indignant. "Of course I can." He put his hands on his hips and suddenly pouted.

Marius never realized how much he missed Petru's little pouts. How cute they were. So, Marius just chuckled and pinched at Petru's puffed out cheeks with both of his hands. "You'll just have to prove me wrong, Petru. But-" Marius saw Arthur out of the corner of his eye. Arthur stood there, arms crossed, just watching the whole interaction, showing no emotion. Marius knew that Arthur still wanted to talk. That they really needed to talk this out. "-For now, could you go back to Lukas and Emil? Arthur and I have to talk."

Petru kept his pout prominent on his face. "No fighting?" Petru inquired. "I don't like it when you and Uncle Arthur start arguing."

"No fighting. We're going to talk this out. You know, like adults." Marius seemed to grimace as he said it, like he realized the sheer hypocrisy of what he said. It took a gentle push towards that direction and Petru retreated for the open door where Lukas now stood. Lukas had Emil by the hand. *'If looks could kill...'* Marius thought as Emil glared absolute daggers in Marius's direction. It really didn't help when Emil narrowed his eyes. Marius swears he saw Emil run a line across his neck in a threat. Still, Emil let up on his glaring when Petru came his way. In fact: Emil smiled and ushered Petru inside. Lukas took the liberty of shutting the door.

Marius watched him go before looking over at Arthur.

Arthur sighed. "Marius... how's your leg?"

"My...leg?" Marius didn't expect that as he looked down at both of his legs. He felt no pain and didn't even know why Arthur was asking to start with. He kicked them both. "Fine? I guess... which one exactly?"

"The one Peter stabbed you in. I wanted to make sure it healed properly when I sent you and Petru on your way."

"It's fine- wait, he *stabbed* me?!"

"Yeah, hilt deep."

"It doesn't matter. Once you hand me my magic back it'll be fine regardless." As soon as it left his mouth, Marius knew. He just *knew* it wasn't going to be that easy. Arthur crossed his arms once again and shook his head.

"Marius-"

"-Don't you 'Marius' me!" Indignation flared through Marius as he abruptly stood from his spot on the couch. His arms cocked back and his whole body tensed. "You- You can't just *keep* my magic!"

"Yeah, well, I can't trust you with it either. Understand, I knew and felt your plight, but that doesn't change the fact that you attacked my children with the intent to murder them." Arthur kept his voice low and even. Marius growled and clenched his fists.

"Damn you, Arthur." Marius growled between clenched teeth. "I got Petru back, I have no reason to attack you-"

"-And I believe you, but I can't *trust* you not to fly off the handle. If there's one thing you've proven to me over the past six to seven years it's that your magic has made you crazy-" Marius wanted to bite back; to spit or scream at Arthur, yet, by some miracle, he managed to hold his tongue and just let Arthur continue. "-That being said... I'm nothing if not reasonable, despite your beliefs." Arthur stared directly into Marius's eyes as he spoke. "I'm willing to strike you a deal."

That got Marius's attention. "Oh?" He questioned.

"Yes. After some thought, and talk with Lukas, I'm willing to give you just enough of your magic back to turn back into a merman with Petru. Only just enough to do that and only that. I basically want you to go magicless, just you, I won't touch Petru."

"A whole year? How am I supposed to train Petru? How am I supposed to... live?..." It was then did a sudden fear hit Marius. The fear of realization. Ever since he was a guppy he's always used magic to... well... do mostly everything for him. Hunt? Magic. Attack? Wasn't it obvious? Hell, he even learned how to use magic to stalk and move about. Marius sat back down and felt his fingers clench at his pants leg as he started to shake. "I don't know if I can do that..." He whispered to Arthur.

"Well, it was either that or go a year magicless as a human. That'll be even harder. You'll have to live somewhere else for starters, according to Lukas there's a Finnish man out for your blood for what you did to his child..." Arthur showed only apathy as he uncrossed his arms and leaned back against the back of the couch.

"You're heartless... absolutely heartless..." Marius could only whine in response despite the sheer hypocrisy.

Arthur didn't back down. "Those are the only offers, Marius. I just want to put this all behind me, trust me, I do..."

"And just why should I prove myself-" Marius didn't even get to finish his yell when Arthur stood up straight and spoke slowly and a little more dangerously.

"You murdered six children, you murdered Francis, you sucked Lukas back into everything *and* kidnapped Emil on top of it all. Oh, you possibly uprooted Lukas's whole life as well! You dragged my boys down with you, and now this whole town knows the secret we were all trying to hide..." There was no question. Only facts thrown back into Marius's face.

And although he didn't agree with it, he felt it was unfair...yet...He knew this punishment was justified.

"...I wanted you to go six years without magic, one for every child you murdered. It was Lukas who felt that was a little unfair, surprisingly, we talked it down to one year. One solid year, no magic."

Marius wanted to argue, oh, how he wanted to argue. Yet... unlike a few days prior, Marius seemed to finally know when he was beat and when to give up. Besides, it's not exactly like he could physically fight Arthur for his magic back now could he.

With a loud sigh of defeat, Marius flopped back down on the couch. "This stinks." He placed his hand over his eyes, enjoying the darkness for just a moment.

"That it does, old friend, That it does..."

Like promised, Arthur returned just a smidge of Marius's magic. He, Lukas, Marius, and Petru stood on the beach, there was no moon out tonight, or maybe there was and it was hidden behind the trees, none of them really knew or cared to know. Marius happily held on to Petru's tiny hand and as they walked down the beach, all of them keeping an eye out for any lingering authorities. Occasionally, Marius would look down at Petru, after six years of him being prone or sick, it was almost surreal for Marius to see him up and about. Skipping of all things, Petru caught him looking, more than once, and each time he offered a smile to Marius.

"I think... this is a good spot." Arthur stopped walking. Lukas kept his distance from them, Emil stood close, still glaring angry daggers Marius's way. Daring- no, *wanting* Marius to do something stupid. He looked like a mini-bodyguard with his arms crossed and standing close, but not too close, to Lukas. It would have normally made Marius laugh and comment about

Lukas's little shark or piranha, but not today. "Gentleman. I think this is where we all part ways." Arthur commented.

Lukas shut his eyes and sighed. "It would seem so." He then crossed his arms over his chest but said nothing further.

"You're staying?" Marius blurted out without thinking. "With the humans? Still?"

"Of course. Maybe not *here* anymore. I have a mess to take care of." Lukas tried to hide his disdain for the situation he was in, but it wasn't working all that well. Marius had nothing to say. Lukas gently took Emil's hand and started to walk away, but not before stopping after a few steps. "...Goodbye and good luck." And with that final saying Lukas left with Emil. Lukas did raise a hand up in a goodbye wave, but didn't turn around.

"Marius..." Arthur got Marius's attention after a moment or two of silence.

"Hm?" Marius lightly tightened his grip on Petru's hand while he looked at Arthur. He felt afraid that Arthur might just snatch Petru from him.

"I know you can do it, lad." Arthur then placed a hand on Marius's shoulder. It was warm and rather comforting. "I believe in you." Arthur practically whispered. Then without another word, Arthur took off, running full speed towards the water clothes and all. With a resounding splash, he went under the waves. It only took a couple of seconds before there was a green flash. Arthur never returned to the surface and Marius saw clothes float up from under the water.

Petru leaned into Marius's side. "Are we finally going back home?"

"I think so. Isn't that what you want?" Marius questioned as he looked at Petru. Petru nodded, yet, he looked a little hesitant. "What's wrong?"

"It's just ... do you think we could come back to the surface sometime?"

Marius couldn't help but chuckle. He gave his head a small shake before addressing Petru. "Maybe not this town, and, unfortunately no time too soon, I'm afraid, but one day. Maybe." Petru's eyes lit up at that and he smiled. Seeing Petru smile made Marius smile in return. "C'mon, let's go home."

Andersen heard the sound of crunching gravel and jumped from his seat in the dining room. He pulled the blinds back and let out a sigh of relief when he saw a familiar car pulling into the driveway. He then rushed towards the front of the house and out the door, he didn't even bother shutting it as he juttet down the steps and rushed towards Lukas's car. Andersen did let out several curses when rocks and gravel stabbed at his bare feet. Yet, that didn't stop him from running up to the car before it came to a full stop.

Andersen tore the driver side door open, causing a yell of surprise from Lukas. Andersen then grabbed Lukas and hauled him out of the car. Lukas jumped back in surprise.

"-You're okay! I was so worried!-"

"-Andersen-" Lukas planted his hand on Andersen's face in an attempt to pry him off. If anything it made Andersen cling tighter.

"Why didn't you call me!? I thought that monster had killed you!"

"Don't you have to work today?! Why are you in your Pajamas?" Lukas finally got his sentence out as he was lifted a few inches off of the ground by Andersen. Andersen answered, but at that moment he pressed his face into Lukas's hair so it was muffled. "Could you repeat that?"

Andersen removed himself from Lukas's hair with a soft sigh. "I've been suspended until further notice." He then placed his chin on top of Lukas's head and the tone told Lukas he was pouting.

"Oh... Oh, Andersen, I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Lukas broke away from Andersen's hug and looked at him quizzically. "I mean... aside from the obvious?"

"Oh, that! Yeah, no. That wasn't part of it. I mean I was questioned to hell and back by Ivan and the Coast guards. I was suspended because I kept Peter a secret from Ivan. Something about withholding evidence or..." Andersen shook his head like it was no big deal. Lukas wasn't impressed.

"Andersen... you're an idiot." Lukas could only sigh with a headshake.

"I'm your idiot." Andersen hummed into Lukas's hair once again.

"Unfortunately." Lukas replied back. It was at that moment did Emil come out of the car, shutting the door behind him. Emil jogged up to the two of them and gave Andersen a brief hug. He then turned to Lukas. Lukas reached over and patted Emil's hair.

"Andersen... I don't think we, Emil and I, can stay here too much longer... not with everything that happened." Lukas told him. Emil had a pout on his face at this, but didn't disagree, whereas Andersen let out a shocked:

"What?! No, you can't go." He clutched onto Lukas's arms. "What about your goals? Or-Or-"

"I know, and I still want that goal, but everybody *knows*." Lukas felt a frown tug at his lips as Andersen frowned at him.

"I know, but, if it makes you feel any better, people are saying it was just some performance you guys put on that went too far!"

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Andersen let out a loud chortle at that. "I know, I know, but the skeptics just can't believe that magic and mermen/maids exist. So, people are saying you guys did it for attention and it just went wrong."

"Yeah? And what does Tino think?... he probably hates me..." Lukas sucked on his teeth in annoyance.

Andersen shook his head. "I don't think he hates you. I'd tell you to ask him yourself but-..." Andersen trailed off and made a face before kicking a rock away.

"-But?"

"He's been Baker acted."

"Baker-" Lukas paused as he thought about that. He's heard the term before and it took him a moment to think about what it really meant. Once it clicked Lukas let out a soft "Oh..."

"Yeah. Don't forget he tried to kill someone... and he fired a firearm in front of children, so Ivan, Berwald, and yes, even Tino, felt it was needed."

"How long are they keeping him?"

"Tino said he's going to stay for a week. Y'know, just to be safe."

"Jesus." Lukas shook his head and felt his frown deepen as he thought about Tino sitting in a mental clinic, stripped of his shoe strings, and all his personal belongings. It broke his heart. "A-And he did this willingly?"

Andersen nodded. "He personally asked me if there were any clinics nearby after the whole ordeal, he looked so out of it. Trust me, I tried to talk him out of it..."

Lukas felt his hand being grabbed and he looked down at Emil. "Is Uncle Tino going to be okay?"

"I can't answer that one, Kiddo. Tino has had a rather rough couple of days especially now with Peter gone ..." Andersen made a face and scratched at his chin. "But, I think a homemade card from his favorite nephew might cheer him up."

"Andersen... you don't know if Tino wants anything to do with us."

"Tino's grieving, he's not heartless, Lukas." Andersen then leaned in and whispered to Lukas. "Besides, even if he is mad about what you are, there's no way he'd stay mad at Emil. Tino knows he's just a kid. I mean, he still talks about Peter despite what Peter is."

'That is a good point.' Lukas thought as he looked down at his feet. "Emil, why don't you go and make that card? Hm? leave Andersen and I to talk?"

Emil did frown at this. "Fine, but if you need me, just call..." Emil tossed a glare at Andersen before retreating.

"Did...did he just glare at me?"

"He's been glaring at everyone." Lukas let out a soft sigh as he watched Emil go inside. "I think the trauma of it all might be causing him to regress back to his old ways."

"Old ways? What are you saying?"

"When he was little..."

"Yeah?"

"He'd attack anything that came near me. Marius mostly."

"Ah, so children *can* sense evil."

Lukas blinked and let it sink in before he suddenly let out a snorting laugh. This caused Andersen to laugh as well. "Still..." Andersen said once his laugh was over. "I take it the issue with Marius has been resolved?"

"For the time being. He's being rather cooperative about the whole thing. So, we can only hope."

A look of relief washed over Andersen's face. "I'm glad. Look... why don't I pop open some whiskey and we sit down and talk about you leaving, because, I won't lie, I don't want you to go, as selfish as that sounds. I mean, you've lived with me for six years now; you're family."

"I know, but surely you don't want me living with you forever, right?"

Andersen looked unsure. "This might just surprise you, but I don't know. Like I said, I don't want you to go... at least not yet."

Lukas scratched at his hair as he looked at Andersen. He looked... well... like a lost puppy. His eyes were big and doe-like. "Alright... let's go get some of that whiskey and talk about it."

Berwald was, unsuccessfully, trying to get Tino to come home tomorrow, after all, being Baker acted only usually lasts for three days. "I miss you." Berwald admitted as he reached over and touched Tino's hand. The orderly watching them was on his phone and simply passed them a glance but didn't look up from his scrolling.

"I can't imagine why..." Tino averted his gaze from Berwald by looking at the table.

"Don't say that."

Tino's cheeks started to redden as his eyes turned watery. "Berwald... I hit you-I-I-I bit you!"

"It wouldn't have been the first time you bit me-"

Tino scoffed loudly as he rolled his eyes. "There's a difference between love bites and me actually sinking my teeth into your arm." Berwald just shook his head and looked at his gauzed arm out of reflex. Tino did, in fact, sink his teeth *deep* into Berwald's flesh during the whole ordeal, drawing an impressive amount of blood by doing so, and testing Berwald's pain tolerance in the process. "Don't forget the paramedics had to sedate me..." Tino grumbled and looked away from Berwald.

This was also true. After Lukas had vanished with Marius, Tino, though no longer violent, wasn't exactly subdued either. He just broke down into screaming sobs. Really, Berwald felt his own heart break at Tino's crying. The last time he cried that hard was during the funeral. Berwald did what he could to help, but it was clear that Tino was not okay and needed serious help. Berwald didn't think the paramedics would sedate Tino, but in this state, Tino refused to move and talking to him was fruitless.

"Tino, you suffered from a nervous breakdown, that's what the doctors say anyway. Honestly, anyone in your situation would have done the same thing." Berwald tried to explain.

"You say 'Nervous breakdown' I say 'long time coming.'" Tino covered his eyes with his hands and slumped into his chair.

"Let's face it, Tino... we need therapy... *real* therapy, not you running to Eduard because you know he'll do it pro-bono. We need grief therapy, and he's a police therapist."

"Berwald..." Tino shook his head. "I'm probably going to get fired. There's no way we can afford it."

"They can't fire you-"

Tino slammed his fist down on the table in anger. Berwald didn't jump, but the orderly did a little and lowered his phone. His eyes were narrowed and Berwald could hear the orderly's thoughts at that moment. '*Tread carefully.*'

"Berwald. I fired a firearm in front of the students-"

"-To protect them-"

"I tried to *murder* someone in front of the children and their parents-"

"-Slightly justified Marius had a student-"

"-Oh and I committed domestic violence *in front of the children*. Are you seeing the pattern here? There's no way that asshole will let me keep my job."

"It wasn't domestic violence-"

"*Stop!* Stop defending my actions! Please, I'm begging you! I did several horrible things and even though you see my side the school board won't. I'll be lucky if I can get a job at McDonalds at this point." Tino sniffled and shook his head.

When it seemed Tino had calmed down, the orderly relaxed. "Five minutes." He called out to the two of them. Berwald frowned. These sessions were never long enough.

"Tino," Berwald took both of Tino's hands into his and placed a soft kiss on them. "I know you're worrying and scared, but please don't think so negatively about yourself or the situation you're in. Even if you do get fired we'll figure something out. We don't have to live here anymore if it comes down to it."

"B-but what about Sven. We can't just leave him behind." Tino sobbed softly and soon tears started to fall. He let out a sniffle when he spoke again. "Or Peter for that matter."

'So, he still feels the same about Peter and he has the same feeling about of leaving Sven-'

Berwald suddenly felt a warm touch to his own hand. When he looked he saw nothing, but... he knew what he was feeling. It seemed Tino felt it just as well as he turned in that direction as well. "...I think... if we leave... Sven will understand." Berwald found himself suddenly saying despite what he was just thinking a few seconds ago. Tino gave another sniffle in response.

"I don't think I have the heart for it, Berwald..."

"...Maybe we don't have to leave town. Maybe... maybe we could downsize, start small. Like we did when we were in college."

Tino wiped his eyes with his fingers. "Small?"

"Yeah, maybe a smaller home or even an apartment. It's just the two of us after all. We don't need that big house..." Berwald let go of Tino and sat back letting him think about it.

Tino's lower lip quivered slightly. "I... I need to think about it." He whispered in a soft voice and Berwald saw Tino's hands start to clench at his pants. "I mean, we'll still be leaving Sven behind."

"Think of it this way. Remember how we put his blanket up in the attic for safe keeping?" Berwald inquired. He could see the orderly starting to walk towards them however; it seemed the man was taking his time in doing so, smaller steps than normal.

Tino nodded with a numb expression on his face.

"Think of it similar to that. We're not leaving him behind, we're just putting him in a safe place where he can't get hurt."

A hiccup left Tino's mouth as his breath hitched. "I..." A soft expression washed over his face as he suddenly reached over and touched his own shoulder. It almost seemed like Tino was stroking the spot on his shoulder. "I don't...*hate* the idea." Tino whispered mostly to himself.

"Time's up, guys." The orderly came up to their table and put a comforting hand on Tino's other shoulder. Tino blinked before looking up at him.

"Already?" Tino sounded like a child being told it's bedtime.

"Unfortunately, yes."

Tino turned back towards Berwald. "Think about it?"

"Obviously. I'm not going to move without you." Berwald smiled as Tino stood. He then stood up as well.

"I wouldn't blame you if you did." Tino gave Berwald a sad smile and started to walk back with the orderly.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Gilbert huffed, the boulder he sat on was rather uncomfortable. He listened to the waves of the ocean and felt his eyes start to slip shut before he shook his head to wake himself up. Ever since Arthur gave him the okay to return home; Gilbert sat outside every night from seven to ten in hopes of seeing his little Birdie again. It's been three days and Matthew had yet to show.

Gilbert knew he wasn't alone in his efforts either. More than once he caught Kiku coming out to the beach and, like Gilbert, he would just wait. Sometimes he'd wait for a few minutes and other nights Kiku would stand out there for hours. Gilbert had a feeling that the authorities seized Kiku's boat or something along those lines because he never took it out, or maybe it was just painful for Kiku to do so.

Or maybe... Kiku feared he was being watched. It wasn't an unorthodox fear to have at this time.

They didn't really speak much to each other. Each knew what the other was doing and respected their space. Tonight wasn't one of those nights. though... Gilbert looked over his shoulder. From his distance he saw that Kiku kept his back porch light on. An unspoken invitation.

With a curse under his breath, Gilbert gave his head another shake and reached into his pants pocket. He pulled out his newly bought pack of smokes and lighter. He'd been clean for a couple years now due to Ludwig but with recent events...

The principal, as well as Yao, were both found the day after the boating incident. Yao was found adrift at sea on a lifeboat. He was dehydrated, sunburnt, and unconscious, but alive. He came too a day ago and Yao had absolutely no memory as to what happened. He didn't even remember boarding the children and teachers. From what Kiku had told Berwald, Yao is currently under investigation.

The principal of the school was a different story. The school had been shut down for the last couple of days due to investigation (by the FBI if Gilbert heard right). During said

investigation they found the principal passed out in a janitorial closet. Aside from being locked in there for roughly three days, he seemed to be doing fine. Much like Yao, he had no memory of how or why he was in the closet. Also like Yao, the principal was under investigation. It was just a giant shit show.

What's weirder was that Lovino almost seemed to back off Eliza and Roderich. He wasn't giving up on the custody battle, but he just... calmed down. Maybe the whole ordeal struck something in him. Though Gilbert had to laugh when Lovino called him one night, obviously a little drunk and happy talking about his: "Kickass bitch of a lawyer that's going to put Eliza and Roderich in their snobby places!"

With a chuckle at the memory, Gilbert popped a cigarette into his mouth and flicked the lighter. At that moment a breeze swept by and snubbed his light. With a german curse, Gilbert brought one of his hands up to block the wind and tried again. This time he got the cherry to light. He flicked the light out and put the lighter back into his pocket.

"You know those'll kill you, right?"

"Máxi-pad. It's been a while. Come, sit with me." Gilbert laughed at Máximo's less than enthusiastic face at the nickname. "C'mon, you knew it was a long time coming."

Máximo rolled his eyes and walked over to Gilbert. He was dressed in normal street clothing, not his uniform. "Any sign of him?" Máximo inquired once he was next to Gilbert.

"Mattie? No."

"Damn..." For a moment the two of them just looked out at the ocean. They watched as the reflection of the moonlight danced with the waves. They both hoped, maybe even prayed, that Matthew would pop up, but as the moments ticked by nothing happened. Gilbert exhaled some smoke from his nose and looked at Máximo.

"What are you doing up this late, Máxi?"

"Bah, couldn't sleep. I keep seeing him, y'know?"

"Mattie?"

"Yeah. All strung up like that. I... I actually thought he was dead at first, that Marius had hung him or strangled him."

"I know what you're saying. It was awful to witness. Not just him, but all of the others he held hostage-"

"-How's Ludwig?"

"Fine. The therapist Ivan recommended is rather nice."

"That's good." Máximo grunted and lowered himself to the sandy beach floor. He fell next to Gilbert's foot and sighed.

"How's work? I know Ivan *has* to be hounding you for information."

"Oh yeah! But, it's been... interesting with the interrogations between Ivan and Abel. Eduard is back after taking a couple of days to rest though."

Gilbert knew that name. He frowned and racked his brain. "Abel... Abel..."

"Petty officer from the Coastal Guard."

"Shit. I forgot about those clowns. Are they-"

"-No, they left yesterday."

"Damn, should I be offended? Because they never questioned me."

"I wouldn't be. They... weren't exactly happy with the situation. Threatened to get the army and navy involved if need be." Máximo rubbed his nose with his thumb and sniffled slightly. Gilbert let the information sink in for a few seconds before giving his head another shake and taking another drag of his cigarette.

"Mattie's probably never coming back- ack!" It was the strangest thing as a seashell was hurled out of the ocean and nailed Gilbert directly in the head causing him to drop his cigarette. Máximo let out a barking laugh, slapping his knee, and doubling over.

"I'm sorry- *Lo siento*-" Máximo wheezed out while he wiped his crying eyes. "I just... that came out of nowhere!"

"You're telling me-" Gilbert was in the middle of grumbling and rubbing the spot where the shell had hit him, but he stopped when he saw a familiar figure in the water. "Birdie?"

It was Matthew. He was currently giggling behind his hand, clearly the culprit. He wasn't alone though. Liam was laying on a nearby rock, his green tail clearly visible from Gilbert's angle. Liam laid his head on his arms as he watched Matthew. Liam locked eyes with Gilbert and Matthew and snorted. "I was mimicking Marius's window magic, Matthew wanted to see you, saw the both of you, and wouldn't shut up about wanting to see you guys." Liam explained. "I'm just here to make sure he doesn't try to purposely beach himself and run off."

Matthew put his hand on his chest in indignation. "I would never-"

"Don't lie to me, you and your brothers share one brain-cell."

Matthew stuck his tongue out at Liam in response before lowering himself in the water. "What do you mean by that?" Máximo couldn't help but inquire. At this, Matthew hunched a little and tapped his two index fingers together.

Liam, on the other hand, huffed in annoyance. "Matthew, Alfred, and Peter have all tried to sneak away and go back to the land, especially now that they know that dad's magic is basically temporary."

"Ehe~..." Matthew rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah..."

"Wait, you guys are... *trying* to come back. Even after everything you went through? After what happened to you guys was witnessed by a majority of the town?" Gilbert asked, almost a little stunned by this information.

"Matthew, as much as we'd love for you to come back on to the land, it's just too dangerous, *amigo*." Máximo put it bluntly.

"Oh..." Matthew deflated as he sank down a little more into the water. "Just when I thought I was starting to figure things out." He sighed before straightening his shoulders up.

"Sorry, Birdie. From what I know Ivan is personally looking for you and Arthur to question." Gilbert started to toe off his shoes.

"It's true." Máximo nodded. "Not only that but *every* news outlet in existence, oh, and the military- what are you doing?" Máximo glanced over at Gilbert to see the albino male stripping off his shirt.

"Going for a swim!" and before Máximo could say or do anything else; Gilbert dived headfirst into the ocean. Máximo opened his mouth to yell, but instead he just huffed and shook his head in mild annoyance.

Liam hardly lifted his head from its spot as he watched Gilbert's form coming up from the water. Suddenly, with a surprised yelp, Matthew was pulled under by his tail.

Matthew laughed at Gilbert, though, Gilbert couldn't hear it, but he could see it... well, kinda. There was a smile in Matthew's eyes and it made Gilbert's heart swell just a little. Like last time they were underwater, Gilbert was reminded that he was, in fact, not a sea creature and needed oxygen. As Gilbert cupped Matthew's face, he just wished he could stay under the water with him for just a little while longer.

Air bubbles escaped Gilbert's mouth and Matthew knew what to do. Grabbing Gilbert's hands he led Gilbert up to the surface. They broke through and Gilbert sucked in some air, much to Liam's amusement.

"So... this is goodbye?" Gilbert felt like a child asking such a question.

"Hm." Matthew frowned as he thought about it. "I don't think so. Not necessarily anyways." He looked at Gilbert and then smiled sweetly. "I mean, it's not like we're moving oceans. We're just hiding for the time being-"

"-And doing a terrible job of it." Liam muttered rather boredly, Matthew ignored him with a dismissive wave.

"So, it's not a goodbye because technically, I'm not leaving. I'm just in the water." Matthew then leaned in and whispered in Gilbert's ear. "Once things go back to normal I can try and sneak away like before, only now I know I *can* have legs-"

"-And we're leaving-" Liam suddenly lackadaisically dived back into the water.

"-What?-"

Gilbert would be lying if he said he didn't laugh as Matthew was suddenly dragged under the water. Gilbert didn't leave the water right away. After about ten or so seconds Matthew suddenly reappeared about a good twenty feet away.

"I'll see you both again soon-" Matthew tried to speak as quickly as he could but he just wasn't fast enough as Liam popped out of the water like an angry shark. With a mighty push to Matthew's shoulders, Liam forcibly shoved Matthew back down into the water, but he didn't get Matthew's arms. It was an amusing sight to behold as Matthew tried to slap at Liam's face while his body was under the water. Gilbert laughed at it all.

Liam then roared in annoyance: "Knock it off!" Before he went back down, once again, dragging Matthew down with him.

When it was clear that they weren't going to come back up again did Gilbert go back to the shore to meet with Máximo again. Máximo let out another barking laugh. "You know, *amigo*, I think Matthew is going to be just fine."

"Máxi... I think I'm going to have to agree with you for once."

Chapter End Notes

And it's done! It's finally done! I know it's a perfect ending but I feel it's the best one I can give! :) I dunno if I'll make a sequel or not. I do have an idea for one but it's unknown right now as I said I'm writing a story for Genshin Impact.

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